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The Artful Roger

Kim Mohan

He says he doesn't pay a lot of attention to the calendar, but don't let that fool you. Roger Zelazny is one of the classiest and most conscientious people I've had the pleasure to work with.

I wrote him a letter on January 22 to see if he'd be interested in helping us celebrate his 30th anniversary as a published writer. He wrote back on February 3 to thank me for asking him—and the second sentence of his letter explained why his reply was (as he put it) delayed.

He agreed to do a new story to celebrate the occasion, which would be presented along with a reprint of "Passion Play," the story from the August 1962 issue of this magazine that got his career started. I asked for a story of 5,000 to 6,000 words, and I asked if he could deliver the manu-

script by April 15. No problem on either count, he said. And sure, he'd be glad to toss in a first-person essay.

Ever the fatalist, I had my doubts that things were going to work out. But if I had known Roger Zelazny and how he responds to a commitment, I wouldn't have worried.

From his letter of March 14: "Just thought I'd drop you a line to let you know how things are going. The story is coming along nicely. It will certainly be of at least moderate length, and probably longer. I still see no problem with the mid-April deadline."

From a note dated March 21: "The story is proceeding extremely well & stands at about 12,000 words. Just wanted to keep you posted."

He was scheduled to be away from home for a few days shortly there-

after. A note on March 24: "I'm getting ready to take off on my trip, but I wanted to let you know before I go that the story will probably come in at about 16–17,000 words."

And then, a postcard written at 8:05 A.M. March 25: "On my way to the airport, but it's finished in draft. Will polish it on my return. Better figure it as closer to 18,000 words."

If I lived next door to the man, he couldn't have done a much better job of keeping me informed.

On April 15, I wasn't the least bit surprised when the manuscript for "Come Back to the Killing Ground, Alice, My Love" arrived at my office. And now I'm extremely proud to turn over the rest of this page, and a good chunk of the rest of the magazine, to a consummate professional. ♦

How I Spent My Past 30 Years

Roger Zelazny

I didn't realize until it was suggested I do this piece that I had been writing professionally for 30 years. This may sound strange, but I'd never looked at the calendar with regard to my occupation. Thinking about it now, I understand why this should be the case.

For as far back as I can remember, writing has been a part of my life. As soon as I learned to read I began writing as well. There was nothing really special about this. Lots of writers I know tell me it was that way with them, too. But later on, when I began selling what I wrote,

it was just a continuation of what I had always been doing: putting words on paper, using them to describe places and people doing things in those places. The fact that I was getting paid for it did serve to increase the output, but, basically, it was only more of the same. I celebrated my first sale, looked forward to the second one, and kept at it. I had always intended it to be so.

And why science fiction and fantasy? Those genres had always been special to me. I'd read lots of other things and I still do, but there was a particular pleasure for me here, simi-

lar to that of my earliest reading when I discovered mythology. I liked reading it and thought I'd try writing it.

I grew up in Euclid, Ohio, on the shore of Lake Erie, and though I love my New Mexico mountains, I still miss the proximity of a large body of water. The schools I attended had adequate libraries, and Euclid had a decent public library. I read all of the science fiction in the libraries and all of their books about writing. And later I read a book called *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, by Isaiah Berlin, a study of Tolstoy's theory of history,

(Please turn to page 8)

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

I was putting together a collection of some of my recent short stories—about two dozen of them, written over the period from 1983 to 1986—when it occurred to me that unlike a great many other writers I have been just about as productive a short-story writer as I have been a novelist. That is, I've written a *lot* of short stories, and a *lot* of novels, without ever regarding myself as a specialist in one form or the other.

Since the beginning of my writing career, almost forty years ago, I've always written both. My first professional sale was a short story and the second was a novel, or perhaps it was the other way around. The rhythm of my writing life was established right at the beginning: a few short stories, then a novel, then some more short stories, and then another book. I never thought twice, or even once, about whether I was primarily a short-length writer or a book-writer. I was a writer, period. I've always written at whatever length seemed appropriate to the story at hand; and because I have always been a writer by trade rather than one who follows the ebb and flow of inspiration, I've also written to the needs of the marketplace. When it seemed to be novel-writing time, I wrote novels. When editors wanted short stories from me, I wrote short stories.

It isn't way that with all writers, and I'm not sure why. Some are distinctly novelists, and some aren't. Ray Bradbury has written a couple

of novels, but he's basically a short-story writer: the short lengths are apparently where he's most comfortable and certainly where he's done his finest work. The same is true of Harlan Ellison and Robert Sheckley. On the other hand, John le Carré and John Fowles may have written a few short stories at some time in their lives, but I haven't seen them, if they exist at all. (Fowles has occasionally written novellas, at least.) Robert A. Heinlein wrote few, if any, short stories after the first dozen years of his career. Hemingway's lifetime output of short stories was enough to fill one good-sized volume, and very impressive stories they are, too; but he also wrote most of them in his first dozen years and rarely bothered with short pieces after about 1938.

Of course, plenty of distinguished science-fiction writers have moved easily between the short lengths and the long ones over the course of their careers. I think immediately of Isaac Asimov, Frederik Pohl, Poul Anderson, Larry Niven, Brian Aldiss, Philip K. Dick, Arthur C. Clarke, and J. G. Ballard; and you can probably supply as many more names in a moment.

Still, it's possible to make long lists of writers who are basically one thing or the other, but not both. On the one hand are the novelists for whom short stories, after the early years of their careers, are rare or nonexistent events. In science fiction and fantasy the names of Frank Her-

bert, E. E. Smith, Jack Vance, Jack Chalker, Piers Anthony, Stephen Donaldson, John Taine, and Andre Norton come quickly to my mind; outside our field, those of Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, William Golding, John Steinbeck, and Norman Mailer. And then there are the short-story writers whose ventures into longer lengths are equally uncommon or in some cases nonexistent, and whose infrequent novels are often awkward and unsatisfactory in some way: Theodore Sturgeon, Clark Ashton Smith, William Tenn, and Damon Knight; Edgar Allan Poe, John Collier, William Trevor, and Mavis Gallant.

Surely the vagaries of temperament have much to do with this. Some writers, particularly in science fiction and fantasy, feel impossibly cramped within the rigid confines of the short story: they want to create whole universes, and need hundreds of thousands of words to move around in. Others—sprinters by nature, rather than long-distance runners—see the novel as a vast and interminable journey that they would just as soon not undertake, and prefer the quick, incisive thrust of the short story. It is the same in other arts. Wagner wrote immense operas, not lieder. Schubert wrote some operas too, but they are all forgotten and his songs are immortal. Verdi once composed a string quartet, apparently to demonstrate that he knew how, but otherwise he worked on a large scale. Michelangelo specialized

in sculptures and frescoes of heroic size; a miniaturist like Paul Klee, master that he was, could not have painted the Sistine Chapel; Rubens was not known for his etchings and drawings. And so on. The choice comes from within. Often enough no choice at all is involved: the artist simply follows the path that seems inevitable.

But then there are those writers who are masters of both the short and long forms and choose in the second half of their careers to work in only one of them, usually the novel, like Hemingway or Heinlein. Surely the author of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and "Capital of the World" still knew how to write short stories after 1940, and the author of "Requiem" and "The Green Hills of Earth" did not mysteriously lose his ability at the short lengths around 1949; but *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Stranger in a Strange Land* must have been matters of higher priority and the short stories ceased. Jack Vance, too, once wrote masterly short stories, but it's been many years since the last one appeared, while his splendid novels continue to come out. It's harder to cite writers who gave up novels after an early start to concentrate only on the short story: Paul Bowles, perhaps, or Truman Capote.

In today's science-fiction field, very few of the well-established writers bother much about short fiction, and even the newcomers tend to move on as quickly as they can to immense trilogies. There's a simple economic reason for this. When I was starting as a writer in the 1950's, you didn't think much about getting science-fiction novels published unless your name was Heinlein or Asimov. The field of paperback books was still a small one and the few publishers who wanted sf used only a couple of novels a year, by the very biggest names. Magazines were where the action was—in 1953 there were close to forty of them—and they were an insatiable market for short stories. So short stories were what we all wrote; and once in a while we would dare to write a novel, hoping that some magazine would be willing to serialize it.

It is all very different now. In an average year, something like *six hundred* new novels of science fiction and fantasy are published in the United States—whereas the five or six sf magazines and the handful of original-fiction anthologies have room for perhaps four hundred fifty stories altogether. That means that for each short science-fiction story that gets published (for which the author might receive anywhere from \$150 or so up to a maximum of \$5000 in a very few cases) there will be 1.3 sf or fantasy novels (and for novels the pay begins at about \$2500 and goes up into the stratosphere). The arithmetic, for the professional writer, is unanswerable. Writing short stories doesn't make much sense financially. If you write them today, you have to want to write them for their own sake. The pay is almost incidental: you do them for love, or because you don't think you can bring a full-length novel off, or because you are a very part-time writer who can't manage the investment of months that a novel requires.

Or, in my case, you write them because you really can't stop yourself.

Temperament, again, as much as economics. As I've already made quite clear, I've never concentrated on one length of fiction at the expense of the other. I've written 500-worders and I've written books 200,000 words long. But that doesn't mean I don't have a preference; and the preference is for writing novels.

Not simply for financial reasons. Even for the professional writer, money isn't the only decision-making factor. But I happen to find short stories a pain in the neck to write, not because I absolutely require enormous amounts of space in which to tell a story, but because I have come to take a very finicky attitude toward short stories. They have to be perfect, I feel, or they don't work at all. A novel can go completely off the tracks for three or four chapters, then recover its sense of direction and roar triumphantly on toward a grand conclusion with no real harm done; but three or four errant paragraphs can wreck a story completely. So writing them is full of tension and stress for me. I revise and revise

and revise, and curse and mutter and curse, and dream longing dreams of the wondrous discursiveness that a novelist enjoys. (Midway through some huge and troublesome novel, of course, I begin dreaming of the miraculous brevity and conciseness of the short story. But that's another issue.) To write a 5000-word short story takes me at least three times as long as to write a 5000-word segment of a novel.

If short-story writing doesn't pay very well and is a grueling chore besides, why do I bother putting myself through the sweaty, painful task of writing them? Because of the challenge they represent, I suppose: because I don't care to exempt myself from the harsh discipline of creating something that's complete in twenty or thirty pages, even though I'd rather not do it very often. A dire internal compulsion drives me. Doing short stories is an exhausting kind of mental exercise that gets harder for me all the time. It's tremendously tempting to give it up altogether—which is exactly why I don't dare stop. Given my druthers, I suppose I'd simply be a novelist; but I continue to insist of myself that periodical I do something shorter.

And thus my oscillations between novels and short stories. It's my good fortune—and Fred Pohl's, and Poul Anderson's, and Arthur Clarke's—to be able to move from one form to the other at will. And I continue to do so, despite something of an inner preference for writing novels.

But what about a writer like Theodore Sturgeon, say, who was a wondrous short-story writer but who could manage only one or two genuine novels? Or John Taine, who wrote a dozen majestic novels in the 1920's and 1930's but apparently only one short story, and that one done as a favor? They didn't simply dislike working in the other form; for all their great skill, they apparently couldn't. Why? I can't say. Wagner and Schubert; Klee and Michelangelo; the mysteries of creativity, inexplicable and fascinating. ♦

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How I Spent My Past 30 Years

(Continued from page 4)

which possessed the best pair of opening paragraphs of any nonfiction work I ever came across. In them he quotes the Greek poet Archilochus—"The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing"—to the end of relating it to a division of writers and thinkers into those two categories: the ones who relate everything to a single, central vision, and the ones who pursue many ends—hedgehogs and foxes. While I was not all that enamored of the rest of the book, I was fascinated by the description and the examples that had followed, for suddenly I knew myself to be a fox.

As a fox, one chases after ideas for their own sake, not to buttress any hard core of belief. I saw that that was the way my mind worked, and I realized it was one of the things I liked about science fiction—the play of ideas. And this fox-hedgehog notion has returned to me many times over the years. I have always gone about my reading—most of it nonfiction—in foxlike fashion, hunting after provocative ideas and insights. When some characters and an idea come together and I feel a story impulse present, I become a temporary hedgehog for the sake of that piece, searching after ways to make everything fit its single, central vision. When it's over I resume my foxlike prowling. The next story may have a very different central vision, perhaps entirely at odds with the previous one.

Thus, with the present story. Why I should have thought of Lewis Carroll and the Marquis de Sade in the same breath, I do not know. Once I did, however, the fox in me went looking for pieces to fit the characters and the impulse. And once they were located, I became a hedgehog for the duration. "Permafrost" was written that way, and I recollect the same feeling while writing "Unicorn Variation," and a horde of others.

Back on the beach at Lake Erie, watching the waves come in and imagining them rippling all the way

across from Canada, I used to get the impulse and sometimes even ideas to keep it company, and it felt identical with the way it feels now. But in those days I couldn't find the characters. Couldn't sell stories either. Actually, it wasn't until about a year and a half to two years after I started selling stories that I began finding characters who really intrigued me. Up to that point, I was using gimmicks and writing after effects. I intentionally took it slowly, trying to teach myself something new with each story. When I felt ready I began stretching the lengths at which I worked. So, finding the appropriate characters might simply have been a function of increased narrative length providing the room for character development. On the other hand, one of the reasons I'd held off for that long was that I wasn't sure how I'd handle better rounded characters. Once I learned, characterization became my mainstay, and now I tend to meet the characters before I find the story, the setting, the ideas. I'd say that this was the big transition point in my work. Whether it grew out of practice and increasing confidence, or was just a matter of accumulated experience during the passage of time, I'll never know for certain.

In the present story ("Come Back to the Killing Ground, Alice, My Love"), I did use a character I'd used before, though Kalifriki appeared in a very different sort of tale in "Kalifriki of the Thread"—a piece inspired in part by the atmosphere in some of E. T. A. Hoffman's stories. I knew when I finished the first one that I was not done with Kalifriki. As Chelsea Quinn Yarbro once remarked to me, "You know you're not finished with characters if they're still talking to you." And as I once said elsewhere, my characters come by and have morning coffee with me. When their stories are finally told they generally stop visiting. And Kalifriki kept dropping in regularly. Everyone else herein is new and different.

I went back and walked on that Ohio beach again a few years ago,

skipping a few stones over the water the way I used to. Nothing was changed physically, but everything was changed. I used to sit there trying to write—a poem, a sketch—and trying to learn the trick, the trick that would turn me into a real writer. I never found it, I realized, because there is no trick. Applying yourself steadily to the work is all there is; that, and the passage of time, during which your desire finds ways to pour your continuing experience into the forms you keep playing with. That's what gave me a set of skills for shaping acceptable work, and later taught me what I know about character development—a study for which a lifetime is too short.

That realization is, I suppose, a part of the reason I must remain a fox. There is too much to know for me ever to feel comfortable with deep, hard-core certainties. And I have seen so many changes, in the world, and in its reflection in science fiction and fantasy. So principles bother me, and I prefer values, which I examine periodically. This is a part of the reason I feel I have also been changed as a writer over these past three decades.

Of course, I like to feel that my personal changes are for the better. One of them is that I have something now that I did not have then, there amid the stones, sand, dead fish, and other washed-up lake detritus. Now I always feel as if I am writing, that even when I am not shaping sentences there is a part of me tasting everything around me in that special way I used to feel only when I was working. Sometimes it's sour grapes, and sometimes it's a flavorful mouthful; and what that means, I guess, is that I've learned to browse experience in a patterned way—and, damn! I love it. That's what I've gotten out of these 30 years. And when I hear that what comes out seems to give readers some pleasure, that just ups the amps. It's been fun. And that is the top of the news. End of assignment. Here is the new tale I've grown, still red and bushy. →

COME BACK TO
THE KILLING GROUND,
ALICE, MY LOVE

ROGER ZELAZNY



All the death-traps in the galaxy, and she has to walk into mine. At first I didn't recognize her. And when I did I knew it still couldn't be right, her, there, with her blind-folded companion in the sandals and dark kimono. She was dead, the octad broken. There couldn't be another. Certain misgivings arose concerning this one. But I had no choice. Does one ever? There are things to do. Soon she will move. I will taste their spirits.

Play it again, Alices. . . .

She came to him at his villa in Constantinople, where, in loose-fitting garments, trowel in hand, spatulate knife at belt, he was kneeling amid flowers, tending one of his gardens. A servant announced her arrival.

"Master, there is a lady at the gate," the old man told him, in Arabic.

"And who could that be?" the gardener mused, in the same tongue.

"She gave her name as Alyss," the servant replied, and added, "She speaks Greek with a foreign accent."

"Did you recognize the accent?"

"No. But she asked for you by name."

"I should hope so. One seldom calls on strangers for any good purpose."

"Not the Stassinopoulos name. She asked for Kalifriki."

"Oh, my. Business," he said, rising and passing the trowel to the man, dusting himself off. "It's been a long time."

"I suppose it has, sir."

"Take her to the lesser courtyard, seat her in the shade, bring her tea, sherbet, melons—anything else she may desire. Tell her I'll be with her shortly."

"Yes, sir."

Repairing within, the gardener removed his shirt and bathed quickly, closing his dark eyes as he splashed water over his high cheekbones. Then his chest, his arms. After drying, he bound his dark hair with a strip of golden cloth, located an embroidered white shirt with full sleeves within his wardrobe, donned it.

In the courtyard at a table beside the fountain, where a mosaic of dolphins sported beneath waters which trickled in small rivers from a man-sized Mt. Olympus, he bowed to the expressionless lady who had studied his approach. She rose slowly to her feet. Not tall, he observed, a full head shorter than himself, dark hair streaked with white, eyes very blue. A pale scar crossed her left cheek, vanished into the hair above her ear.

"Alyss, I believe?" he inquired, as she took his hand and raised it to her lips.

"Yes," she replied, lowering it. "Alice." She gave it a slightly different accenting than his man had done.

"That's all?"

"It is sufficient for my purposes, sir." He did not recognize her accent either, which annoyed him considerably.

He smiled and took the chair across from her as she

reseated herself. He saw that her gaze was fixed upon the small star-shaped scar beside his right eye.

"Verifying a description?" he inquired as he poured himself a cup of tea.

"Would you be so kind as to let me see your left wrist?" she asked.

He shook back the sleeve. Her gaze fell almost greedily upon the red thread that was wrapped about it.

"You are the one," she said solemnly.

"Perhaps," he replied, sipping the tea. "You are younger than you would have your appearance indicate."

She nodded. "Older, also," she said.

"Have some of the sherbet," he invited, spooning two dishfuls from the bowl. "It's quite good."

I steady the dot. I touch the siphon and the bone. There, beyond the polished brass mirror, sipping something cool, her remarking in Greek that the day is warm, that it was good to find a shaded pausing place such as this caravanserai, my doorstep, in which to refresh themselves—this does not deceive me in its calculated nonchalance. When they have finished and risen, they will not head back to the street with its camels, dust, horses, cries of the vendors, I know that. They will turn, as if inadvertently, in the direction of this mirror. Her and the monk. Dead ladies, bear witness. . . .

"I can afford you," she told him, reaching for a soft leather bag on the flagging beside her chair.

"You precede yourself," he responded. "First I must understand what it is that you want of me."

She fixed him with her blue gaze and he felt the familiar chill of the nearness of death.

"You kill," she said simply. "Anything, if the price is right. That is what I was told."

He finished his tea, refilled their cups.

"I choose the jobs I will accept," he said. "I do not take on everything that is thrust at me."

"What considerations govern your choices?" she asked.

"I seldom slay the innocent," he replied, "by my definitions of innocence. Certain political situations might compel me—"

"An assassin with a conscience," she remarked.

"In a broad sense, yes."

"Anything else?"

"Madam, I am something of a last resort," he responded, "which is why my services are dear. Any simple cut-throat will suffice for much of what people want done in this area. I can recommend several competent individuals."

"In other words, you prefer the complicated ones, those offering a challenge to your skills?"

"'Prefer' is perhaps the wrong word. I am not certain what is the right one—at least in the Greek language. I do tend to find myself in such situations, though, as the higher-priced jobs seem to fall into that category, and those are normally the only ones I accept."

She smiled for the first time that morning, a small, bleak thing.

"It falls into that category," she said, "in that no one has ever succeeded in such an undertaking as I require. As for innocence, you will find none here. And the politics need be of no concern, for they are not of this world."

He nibbled a piece of melon.

"You have interested me," he said.

5

At last, they rise. The monk adjusts the small bow he bears and places his hand upon her shoulder. They cross the refreshment area. They are leaving! No! Could I have been wrong? I realize suddenly that I had wanted it to be her. That part of me I had though fully absorbed and transformed is suddenly risen, seeks to command. I desire to cry out. Whether it be "Come!" or "Run!" I do not know. Yet neither matters. Not when it is not a part of her. Not when they are departing.

But.

At the threshold, she halts, saying something to her companion. I hear only the word "hair."

When she turns back there is a comb in her hand. She moves suddenly toward the dot manifestation which hangs brightly upon the wall to her right. As she drops her veil and adjusts her red tresses I become aware that the color is unnatural.

6

"Not of this world," he repeated. "Whence, then, may I inquire?"

"Another planet, far across the galaxy from here," she replied. "Do these terms mean anything to you?"

"Yes," he answered. "Quite a bit. Why have you come here?"

"Pursuit," she said.

"Of the one you would have me slay?"

"At first it was not destruction but rescue that we sought."

"We?"

"It took eight of me to power the devices which brought us here, an original and seven copies. Clones."

"I understand."

"Really? Are you, yourself, alien to this place?"

"Your story is the important one just now. You say there are eight of you about?"

She shook her head.

"I am the last," she stated. "The other seven perished in attempting the task I must complete."

"Which are you, the original or a clone?"

She laughed. Then, abruptly, her eyes were moist, and she turned away.

"I am a copy," she said, at length.

"And you still live," he remarked.

"It is not that I did not try. I went in after all of the others failed. I failed, too. I was badly injured. But I managed to escape—barely."

"How long ago was this?"

"Almost five years."

"A long time for a copy to stay alive."

"You know?"

"I know that many cultures which employ clones for a particular job tend to build in some measure against their continued existence once the job is done, a kind of insurance against the . . . embarrassment . . . of the original."

"Or the replacement, yes. A small poison sac at the base of the skull in my case. I believe my head injury did something to nullify its operation."

She turned her head and raised her hair. There were more scars upon her neck.

"He thinks I am dead," she went on. "I am certain. Either from the encounter or from the passage of time. But I know the way in, and I learned something of the place's rules."

"I think you had better tell me about this person and this place," Kalifriki said.

7

The Alices are singing their wordless plaint. Now and forever. I build another wall, rings set within it, chains threaded through them. For all of them. Come back, come back, Alice, my last. It is you. It must be. Make the movement that will commit you, that will transport you. Else must I reach forth the siphon, as I have so many times. Even if it be not you, I must now. You resurrect an older self.

"Good," she says, putting away her comb, turning toward the door.

No!

Then she turns back, lips set in a tight line, raising her hand, touching the reflecting surface. A moment, as she locates the pulses, passes her hand through the activation sequence.

As her fingers penetrate the interface the bowman is suddenly behind her, laying his hand upon her shoulder. No matter. He may bear an interesting story within him.

8

"Aidon," she said. "He is Aidon."

"The one you seek?" Kalifriki asked. "The one you would have me kill?"

"Yes," she said. Then, "No. We must go to a special place," she finished.

"I don't understand," he said. "What place?"

"Aidon."

"Is Aidon the name of a man or the name of a place?"

"Both," she said. "Neither."

"I have studied with Zen masters and with Sufi sages," he said, "but I can make no sense of what you are saying. What is Aidon?"

"Aidon is an intelligent being. Aidon is also a place. Aidon is not entirely a man. Aidon is not such a place as places are in this world."

"Ah," he said. "Aidon is an artificial intelligence, a construct."

"Yes," she said. "No."

"I will stop asking questions," he stated, "for now. Just tell me about Aidon."

She nodded once, sharply.

"When we came to this system looking for Nelsor," she began, "the ship's instruments showed that something on this planet had gained control of a cosmic string, circumnavigating the universe, present since its creation. We dismissed this at the time, for it was actually one of the tiny holes of blackness—an object supercollapsed to an unworldly point, also present since the creation—that we were seeking. For this would lead us to Nelsor's vessel, from which a damage-pulse had come to us. We use the black objects to power our way through other spaces. Do you understand?"

"That part, yes," he said. "I don't understand who or what Nelsor is, let alone Aidon."

"They are the same," she said, "now. Nelsor was her—the original Alice's—lover, mate, consort, husband-relation. He piloted the vessel which had the trouble, and they came down in this general area of your planet. I believe that Aidon took control of the vessel—and of Nelsor as well—and caused the landing here, and that this is what triggered the damage-pulse."

She glanced at him.

"Aidon," she said, "is difficult to explain. Aidon began as one of those small, black, collapsed objects which make a hole in space. We use them as specialized devices. Bypassing space for distant travel is one of the ends for which they are employed. They are set up for most of their jobs—travel included—by swirling a field of particles about them at high velocity. These fields are impressed with considerable data for the jobs they are to perform. The field is refreshed at its outer perimeter, and the data is replicated and transferred outward in waves as the inner perimeter is absorbed. So there is a matching informed particle-feed to equal the interior information loss. The device draws on the radiation from the collapsed object for power and is programmed to be self-regulating in this regard."

"I understand what you are saying," Kalifriki replied, "and possibly even where this is going now. Such a thing becomes intelligent—sentient?"

"Generally. And normally their input is well controlled," she answered.

"But not always?"

She smiled, momentarily. Kalifriki poured more tea.

"Of all categories of employment, there is less control over the input of those used in space travel," she responded, "and I suppose that the very act of traversing the peculiar domains they must has its odd results. The experts are not in agreement on this. One thing which definitely affects such a construct, however, is that for certain areas of space passage the pilot must maintain constant direct communication with it. This requires a special sort of person for pilot, one possessing the ability to reach it mentally—a telepathic individual with special training for working with constructed intelligences.

Such a relationship will infect the construct to some extent with the operator's personality."

She paused for a drink of tea.

Then, "Sometimes such constructs become disordered, perhaps from staring too long into the heart of darkness between the stars. In a human we would call it madness. The vessels often simply vanish when this happens. Other times, if it occurs in known space there may be a signature pulse indicating the vehicle's destruction. As with Aidon, they may digest their operators' minds first—an overlay that could enhance the madness to a kind of schizophrenia."

"So Aidon ate Nelsor," said Kalifriki, raising his cup, "and brought the vessel to Earth."

She nodded.

"Whatever had grown twisted within him twists whatever it acquires. It twisted Nelsor's feelings for Alice. He destroyed the four Alices one by one, so that he might know them in their pain. For this is how he learned love, as a kind of pain, from the twistings of darkness that damaged him, to the pain of Nelsor's passing. Not totally alien, perhaps, for there are people who love through pain, also."

Kalifriki nodded.

"But how do you know that this is the case with Aidon?" he asked.

"Alice was also a pilot," she said, "and as such, a sensitive. She had a strong bond of this sort with Nelsor. All of her clones shared her ability. When she brought the final three of us and came seeking him—for he seemed still alive, but somehow changed—this was the means by which we located the entrance to the blister universe he had created."

"He has his own world?"

"Yes. He formed it and retreated to it quickly after coming to this place. And there he dwells, like a trapdoor spider. Alice entered and was destroyed by him. We all felt it happen. Then, one by one, the three of us who remained essayed the passage—each succeeding in penetrating a little farther into the place because of her predecessor's experience. But each of the others was destroyed in the process. I was the last, so I knew the most of how his world operated. It is a kind of slow killing machine, a torture device. I was injured but was able to escape."

She brushed at her scar.

"What could you have hoped to accomplish?" he asked. "Why did you keep going in when you saw what he was up to?"

"We hoped to reach a point where we could communicate with that part of him which is still Nelsor. Then, by linking minds, we had thought to be able to strengthen him to overcome Aidon. We hoped that we could save him."

"I thought he was dead—physically, that is."

"Yes, but in that place, with that power, he would have been godlike, if he could have been freed even briefly and gained control of Aidon again. He might have been able to reconstitute his body and come away in it."

"But . . ." Kalifriki said.

"Yes. Aidon proved so much stronger than what remained of Nelsor that I saw it could never be. There is no choice now but to destroy Aidon."

"Why not just let him be if he's retreated to his own universe?"

"I can hear their cries—Nelsor's, and those of the ravished souls of my sisters. There must be some release for what remains of them all. And there are others now. The entrance to his underworld lies hidden in a public house on a trade route. When a sufficiently sensitive individual enters there, Aidon becomes aware of it, and he takes that person to him. He has developed a taste for life stories along with his pain. He extracts them both, in a kind of slow feasting. But there is more. You are aware of the nature of such objects. You must realize that one day he will destroy this world. He leeches off it. Eventually, he will absorb it all. It will hover forever in a jumble of images on his event horizon, but it will be gone."

"You would hire me to destroy a black hole?"

"I would hire you to destroy Aidon."

Kalifriki rose and paced through several turns.

"There are many problems," he said at last.

"Yes," she replied, drinking her tea.

9

... Passing through the mirror into my world, hand emerging from a lake, slim white arm upthrust as if holding the sword in that story the Frenchman had. And hesitation. Coy, her return, as if waiting for me to reach out, to hand her through. Perhaps I shall. There is amusement to be had in this. Come, siphon....

Fading, faded, gone. The arm. She wavered and went out, like a flame in a sudden draft. Gone from beneath the lake, behind the mirror. Along with the blind monk. To what realm transported? Gone from the inn, from my world, also.

But wait....

10

"You are asking me to pit my thread, in some way, against a singularity," he said.

"How is it that your string resembles a piece of red thread?" she asked.

"I require a visible appearance for it locally," he said, "to have something to work with. I do not like your idea."

"As I understand these things, your thread goes all the way around the universe. It was this that we detected on our approach. There are fundamental physical reasons why it can never have an end. A singularity could not bite a piece out of it. The antigravity of its pressure would exactly cancel the gravity of the energy. So there would be no net change in the gravity of the black hole which tried to take it in. The hole would not grow in size, and the situation would remain static in that regard. But you would have Aidon hooked with the string passing through him. Could you then transfer him to another universe?"

Kalifriki shook his head.

"No matter what I might do with him that way, the hole would remain permanently attached to the thread, and that is unacceptable. It might cause unusual loopings. No. I will not match two such fundamental objects directly against each other. If I am to be retained to destroy Aidon I will do it my way, Alice. Aidon, as I understand it, is not really the black hole itself, but a self-sustaining, programmed accretion disc which has suffered irreparable damage to its information field. That could be the point of my attack."

"I don't see how you would proceed with it."

"I see only one way, but it would mean that you would not be able to return to your home world."

She laughed.

"I came here prepared to die in this enterprise," she said. "But, since the black hole cannot be destroyed and you will not attempt shifting it to another universe, I need to know what your attack will involve—as further disruption of the information will involve Nelsor as well as Aidon."

"Oh? You said you'd given up on Nelsor, that what was left of him was ruined and merged with Aidon, that the only course remaining was to destroy the entire construct."

"Yes, but your talk of my not returning home implied that you wanted my ship or something from it. That could only be its singularity drive."

"You're right."

"So you intend somehow to use one black hole against the other. And it could work. Such a sudden increase in mass without a compensating acceleration of the field could result in its absorbing the field faster than the field could replicate itself. You would make the hole eat Aidon and Nelsor both."

"Correct."

"I don't see how you could get close enough to do it. But that is, as you say, your problem. I might be able to penetrate Aidon's world to a point where I could communicate with Nelsor mentally and make a final effort to save him, to complete my mission. I want you to hold off on doing what you contemplate until I've tried."

"That would narrow our safety margin considerably. Why this sudden change of heart?"

"It was because I saw the possibility when I began to understand your plan. Bringing another singularity into that place might perturb Aidon to the point where he may lose some control over what he holds of Nelsor. If there is any chance he might still be freed.... I must try, though I be but an image of his lady. Also, my telepathic bond with him may be stronger than that of any of the other six."

"Why is that?" Kalifriki asked.

She reddened and looked away. She raised her cup and lowered it again without drinking.

"Nelsor took no sexual pleasure with the clones," she said, "only with the original Alice. One time, however, I was in her quarters seeking some navigational notes we had discussed while she was occupied in another part of the vessel. He came seeking her and mistook me for

his lady. He had been working hard and I felt sorry for him in his need for release. So I assumed her role and let him use me as he would her, giving him what pleasure I could. We enjoyed each other, and he whispered endearments and later he went away to work again. It was never discovered, and I've never spoken of it till now. But I have heard that such things can strengthen the bond."

"So you care for him in a somewhat different way than the others," Kalifriki said, "as he did for you, whatever the circumstances."

"Yes," she replied, "for I am her equal in all ways, not just genetically, having known him as the other six did not."

"So you would undertake an even greater risk for him?"

"I would."

"And if you fail?"

"I'd still want you to destroy him, for mercy's sake."

"And if you succeed, and the world is coming apart about us? It may be harder to escape under those circumstances. I don't really know."

She reached for her bag.

"I brought all the gold bars I could carry comfortably. There are a great many more aboard my vessel. I'll give them all to you—"

"Where is your vessel?"

"Beneath the Sea of Marmara. I could summon it, but it were better to go out in a boat and simply raise it for a time."

"Let me see how much gold you have in the sack."

She hefted it and passed it to him.

"You're stronger than you look," he said as he accepted it. He opened it then and examined its contents. "Good," he said. "But we will need more than this."

"I told you you can have it all. We can go and get it now."

"It would not be for me, but for the purchase of equipment," he told her. "This bag and another like it should suffice for that, if I take the job."

"There will still be ample metal left for your fee," she said. "Much more than this. You *will* take the job, won't you?"

"Yes, I will."

She was on her feet.

"I will get you the gold now. When can we leave for Ubar?"

"Ubar? That is where Aidon has opened his office?"

"Yes. It lies near an Arabian trade route."

"I know the place. We cannot go there immediately, however. First, there are preparations to be made."

"Who are you really?" she asked him. "You know too much. More than the culture of this world contains."

"My story is not part of the bargain," he said. "You may rest now. My servant will show you to a suite. Dine with me this evening. There are more details that I wish to know concerning Aidon's world. Tomorrow I would inspect your vessel and obtain the additional gold we will need for a trip we must take."

"Not to Ubar?"

"To India, where I would obtain a certain diamond of

which I have heard, of a certain perfection and a certain shape."

"That will be a long journey."

"Not really. Not as I shall conduct it."

"By some employment of the string? You can do that?" He nodded.

"How did you gain such control over a thing like that?"

"As you said, Alice, I know too much."

11

... But wait. Now they are back. Her arm still extends above the waters of my lake. Likely but some trick of the interface, some roving particle's hit within the nano-circuitry, that fogged the transfer. They come now into my world, wet white garment clinging to the well-remembered contours of her form—nipples above their orbs, curves of hip and back and buttocks, shoulders, thighs—ripe for the delicate raking of claws. And the man . . . he is more muscular than first I thought. A lover, then, perhaps. Then to see those muscles flex when the skin has been removed to the waist . . . there is that to fill the air with the music of outcry and weeping. Dead Alices, give them a song as they come ashore, of welcome to their new home, through crystal forest beneath a sky of perfect blue. How long from that then to this now? Centuries. As entropy here rockets to the sharp curves of my architecture, the contours of its form rake of my desire. The arrow of time passes and returns down sharp geodesics, pierces memory to the rage, impales rage that the love may flow. Why did you come back, form of hatred and its opposite? You will tell me, upon the ground I have prepared for you, tell, to the chorus of your sisters beneath a bleeding sky. But we must not rush these things, Alice, my last. For when you are done the ages will be long, the glory of your exposed architecture a piece of frozen time, distributed in monument about the crying landscape. Come back to the Killing Ground, Alice, my love. I've many a present to gift you there, the entire universe our angel of record against the long dark time. Set foot upon the shore and find your way.

The ladies sing your nuptials in the Place of Facing Skills.

12

Kalifriki dropped the anchor and struck the sails of their boat, as Alice moved to the bow and began singing in a lilting language he did not understand. The beginning morning's light touched the waves with flecks of gold and a cool breeze stirred her zebra hair upon her shoulder. He leaned against the gunwale and watched her as he listened. After a time the boat rose with a long, slow swell, subsiding only gradually. Her voice went out across the water, vibrated within it, and suddenly her eyes widened, reminding him of one of the Acropolis Maidens, as the water roiled to starboard and a curving, burnished form surfaced there like the back of some great, mysterious sea creature rising to meet the day.

He stirred himself, fetching a pole with a hook affixed to its end to grapple them closer to the bronzed surfaces. He glanced back at her before he used it, and she nodded. Reaching then, he caught it within one of the stair-like projections which had rippled into being upon its side, leading up to a hatch. He drew them nearer until he felt the scraping of their hull upon metal.

"Grown, not fabricated," he remarked.

"Yes," she replied, moving forward.

He held the grapple until she had crossed over to the alien vessel's companionway. Then he set it aside and followed.

By the time he came up behind her she had the hatch open. She entered and he looked down into a lighted interior, down to a soft green deck which might be covered with tailored grasses, furniture built into niches in contoured walls without corners.

Entering, he descended. Barely visible scenes flashed across surfaces he passed. A small vibration communicated itself to him, through the floor, through the air. They passed rooms both bright and muted, traversing corridors with windows that seemed to open upon alien landscapes—one, where red, treelike forms scrambled across an ebony landscape beneath a double sun causing him to pause and stare, as if remembering.

At length, she halted before a tan bulkhead, manipulated a hatch set within it, flung it open. Stack upon stack of small golden bars lay within the revealed compartment, gleaming as through a hint of green haze.

"Take all you want," she said.

"I'll want another bag such as the first, for the transaction of which I spoke," he told her, "and another after that for the first half of my fee. I will claim the final payment when the job is done. But we can collect these on the way out. I wish to view the source of the ship's power now."

"Come this way."

He followed her farther into the vessel's interior, coming at last to a circular chamber where watery visions appeared around the walls, including one of the underside of his boat, off to his right.

"This is the place," Alice said.

Kalifriki did not see what she did, but suddenly the floor became transparent and far beneath his feet it seemed that something pulsed darkly. There came a dizziness and he felt drawn toward the center of the room.

"Open it," he said.

"Move back two paces, first."

He obeyed. Then the floor opened before him, the section where he had been standing dropping to become three steps leading down to a narrow well. Its forward wall housed a clear compartment within which he seemed to feel the presence of something drawing him. He descended the steps.

"What are the dangers? What are the safeguards?" he asked.

"You are safe where you are," she answered. "I can open the panel and give you a closer look."

"Go ahead."

It slid back and he stared for a moment.

"How would you manipulate it?" he asked.

"Forcefield pressures against its container," she replied.

He shook out a strand of the thread from his wrist, snaked it about the opening several times, withdrawing it slowly on each occasion.

"All right, I can work with this," he said a little later. "Seal it in again."

The compartment closed before him.

"... Pure carbon crystal lattice, antigrav field webbed throughout," he said as to himself. "Yes. I saw something like this managed once, a long time ago." He turned and mounted the stair. "Let's go in and get the gold. Then we can head back."

They withdrew the way they had come in, returning to the boat with two heavy sacks. The vessel's hatch secured, she sang it back beneath the waves. The sun stood now fully risen, and birds dipped toward the waters about them as he weighed the anchor and set the sails.

"Now?" she said.

"Breakfast," he replied.

"Then?" she asked.

"India," he said.

13

Now the monk has fully entered my world, following her. Suddenly, things are no longer as they have been. Things are no longer right. Things seem to collapse like strange wave functions about him as he passes. Yet nothing seems really changed. What has he brought with him into my world, that I feel uneasy at his presence here? Is it a kind of turbulence? Is it that I am running faster? It would be hard to tell if my spin state were affected. Where did she find him? Why did she bring him? An aged tree reaches the end of its growth and shatters as he goes by it. I do not believe I like this man, shuffling unseeing through my gardens of crystal and stone. Yet perhaps I shall like him a great deal when the time comes. Such feelings are often close akin. In the meantime, it is always amusing to observe when a new thing comes to this place. My *arbor decapitans* awaits, but fifty paces ahead. She knows of it, of course. All of the Alices learned of it, the first the hard way. Yet it is good sport to see such things do their business. Yes, he will be all right. New blood must be brought to the game from time to time, else there is no bite to it. I will let them play through, to the end of her knowledge. . . .

14

In Maharajah Alamkara's palace of white marble they were feasted and entertained with music and dance, for Kalifriki had once done some work for that ruler involving a phantom tiger and some missing members of the royal family. Late into the evening a storyteller regaled them with an almost unrecognizable version of the event.

The following day, as Kalifriki and Alice walked amid walls of roses in the royal gardens, the chamberlain, Rasa, sent for them to discuss the business to which Kalifriki had alluded the previous evening.

Seated across the counting table from the heavy dark man of the curled and shiny mustaches, they beheld the stone known as the Dagger of Rama, displayed on a folded black cloth before them. Almost four inches in length, it was broad at the base, tapering upward to a sharp apex; its outline would be that of a somewhat elongated isosceles triangle, save that the lower corners were missing. It was perfectly clear, without a hint of color to it. Kalifriki raised it, breathed upon it. The condensation of his breath vanished immediately. He scrutinized it then through a glass.

"A perfect stone," Rasa said. "You will find no flaws."

Kalifriki continued his examination.

"It may hold up long enough," he said to Alice in Greek, "if I frame it appropriately, using certain properties of the thread to control external considerations."

"A most lovely stone for your lady to wear between her breasts," Rasa continued. "It is sure to influence the *chakra* of the heart." He smiled then.

Kalifriki placed a bag of gold upon the table, opened it, poured forth its contents.

Rasa picked up one of the small bars and studied it. He scratched it with his dagger's point and measured it, turban bobbing above the gauge. Then he placed it upon a scale he had set up to his left and took its weight.

"Of great purity," he remarked, tossing it back upon the table. Then he raised several of the bars from the pile and let them fall from his hand. "Still, it is not enough for so remarkable a stone. It may well have accompanied Rama on his journey to confront Ravan in the matter of Sita's abduction."

"I am not interested in its history," Kalifriki replied, and he brought up the second bag of gold and added its bars to the heap. "I've heard report that the tax collectors have had a lean time these past several years."

"Lies!" Rasa stated, opening a nearby chest and dipping his hand into it. He withdrew and cast forth a fistful of semiprecious stones upon the tabletop. Among them lay a small carved mountain of pale green jade, a pathway winding about it in a clockwise direction from base to summit. His gaze falling upon this piece, he reached out and tapped it with a thick forefinger. "Sooner would this spiral change direction," he said, "than would I undersell a treasure simply to raise funds."

Kalifriki raised his wrist. The thread touched upon the piece of jade, seemed to pass within it. The stone moved slightly. The spiral now wound in the opposite direction.

Rasa's eyes widened.

"I had forgotten," he said softly, "that you are the magician who slew the phantom tiger."

"I didn't really kill him," Kalifriki said. "He's still out there somewhere. I just came to terms with him. Storytellers don't know everything."

The man sighed and touched his middle.

"This job is sometimes very trying," he said, "and sometimes seems to give me pains in my stomach. Excuse me."

He removed a small vial from a pouch at his sash, as Kalifriki moved his wrist again. As he unstoppered the container and raised it to his lips, Kalifriki said, "Wait."

Rasa lowered the vial.

"Yes?" he asked.

"If I heal your ulcer," Kalifriki said, "you may well bring it back with too much worry and aggravate it with too many spices. Do you understand?"

"Heal it," he said. "It is hard to cultivate philosophy in the face of necessity, and I do like my foods well seasoned. But I will try."

Kalifriki moved his wrist again and Rasa smiled. He stoppered the vial and replaced it in the pouch.

"All right, magician," he said. "Leave the gold. Take the stone. And if you see the white tiger again, let it know that you pass this way occasionally and that bargains are to be kept."

Later, in the garden at twilight, Alice asked him, "How did you do that reversal on the stone?"

"The full circumference of the thread is less than 360 degrees," Kalifriki replied. "The negative pressure of anti-gravity affects the geometry of space about it. Its missing angle is my key to other spaces. I simply rotated the stone through a higher space."

She nodded.

"I seem to recall something of this property from my training," she said. "But how did you heal the ulcer?"

"I speeded up time in its vicinity, letting the natural processes of his body heal it. I hope that he takes my advice and learns some detachment, from his work and his food."

They took a further turn, into an area of the garden they had not yet explored. The flowers seemed to grow flat upon a flattening prospect along the twisting trail they followed. Then they were gone and it was the dead of night with great winnowings of stars blazing above them as they entered the lesser courtyard of Kalifriki's villa at Constantinople.

"You still smell of roses," she said.

"So do you," he replied, "and good night."

15

... Walking through my forest, ridiculous archaic weapon upon his back, his hand upon her shoulder, the monk follows the Alice. This one, I note, is scarred. My last Alice, then. She did escape, of course. And gone all this time. Planning, surely. What might she have in mind for the final foray, the last gasp of the octad? Its aim, certainly, is to free Nelsor. Nelsor. . . . Even now, I feel her reaching out toward him. Disturbing. She is the strongest in this regard. Yet soon she will be distracted. They approach my favorite tree. Soon now. . . . It spins in its socket, each limb a saber of glass. But she drops to the ground at precisely the right moment, and her monk moves with her in instant response. They inch their way forward now, the limbs flashing harmlessly, cold fire above them. Yet Endway's Shoot is next, where I took my second Alice, and the Passage of Moons may take them yet, even aware of the peril. And already she calls again. Nelsor. . . . ?

Kalifriki sat all the next day in meditation, his bow before him upon the ground. When he had finished he walked on the shore for a long while, watching the waves come in.

Alice met him on his return and they took a late supper together.

"When do you plan to embark for Ubar?" she asked him, after a long silent time.

"Soon," he said, "if all goes well."

"We will visit my vessel in the morning?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"It depends partly on how long the work there takes."

"Partly?"

"I think that I will want to meditate some more afterwards. I do not know how long that will take."

"Whenever . . ." she answered.

"I know that you are eager," he said later. "But this part must not be rushed."

"I understand."

He walked with her then into the town, passing lighted residences, some shops, government buildings. Many of the sounds of the city had grown still with the darkness, but there was music from some establishments, shouts, laughter, the creaking of a few passing carts, the stamping of horses' feet; they smelled spices in some neighborhoods, perfumes in others, incense from a church.

"What did you do," he asked her, from across a table where they sat sipping a sharp yellow wine, "in the five years between your escape from Aidon and your coming to see me?"

"I traveled," she replied, "seeking you—or someone like you—and trying to find the surface locus of that string. It had seemed bound to this world, as if it were somehow being employed. I supposed that one who had mastered it could be the one I needed to help me in this. I traveled with many servants—with some large male always in charge—as if I were part of a great man's retinue rather than owner of the lot. It is difficult being a woman on this world. I visited Egypt, Athens, Rome, many places. Finally, I heard stories of a man called Kalifriki, who had been employed by Popes, Emperors, Sultans. I traced the stories down. It took a long time, but I could afford to pay for every scrap of information. They led me here."

"Who told you the stories?"

"A poet. He called himself Omar, tentmaker."

"Ah, yes. A good man. Drank too much, though," said Kalifriki, sipping his wine. "And locally?"

"A priest named Basileos."

"Yes. One of my agents. I am surprised he did not warn me."

"I came immediately. I hurried. There was no opportunity for him to beat my arrival with a message. He told me to make further inquiry of Stassinopoulos, but I decided to ask for you here by name instead. I suspected by then that you had a second identity, and I was certain

that a man such as yourself would be too curious not to give me audience under the circumstances. I was in a hurry. Five years of hearing their cries has been too long."

"You still hear them, right now?"

"No. Tonight they are silent," she said.

The moon fell down the sky, was caught in the Golden Horn.

17

Now, Nelsor, they have reached the Shoot, a mountain hurtling by them, but feet above the ground. They must crawl upon their bellies here, and even then, if one of my small satellites whose long ellipse brings it by here has so rotated that some downward projection rakes the land—*quisib!* A pair of stepped-on cockroaches. Too fast? True. But this is but the foreplay, dear companion, my mentor. She calls to you again. Do you hear her? Do you wish to answer her? Can you? Ah! another rock—and a jagged beauty it is!—races its purple shadow above the blood-red way. By them. And still they crawl. No matter. There will be more.

18

They completed the transfer on the Sea of Marmara that morning and afternoon. Then Kalifriki, clad in brown kimono and sandals, meditated for a brief time. At some point his hand went forward to take hold of the bow. Bearing it with him, he walked away from his villa down toward the sea. Alice, glimpsing his passage from her window, followed him at a distance. She saw him walk upon the shore, then halt, take forth a cloth and bind his eyes with it. He braced the bow, removed an arrow from its case, set it against the string. Then he stood holding them, unmoving.

Minutes passed on toward the end of day and he did not stir. A gull flew near, screaming. The better part of an hour went by. Then another gull passed. Kalifriki raised the bow almost casually, drew it, released the arrow into the air. It passed beside the bird and a single feather came loose, drifted downward.

He removed the cloth from his eyes and watched the feather rock its way to the water. She wanted to sing, but she only smiled.

Kalifriki turned then and waved to her.

"We leave for Ubar in the morning," he called out.

"Did you want the bird or the feather?" she asked, as they walked toward each other.

"To eat the bird is not to digest its flight," he replied.

19

They have passed Endway's Shoot, where my moons flow like a string of bright beads. Leaving the passage like a trail of blood behind them, they rise, turning sharply to the left, climbing to the yellow ridge that will take them down into the valley where they must pass through my Garden of Frozen Beings, the place where I collected my third Alice. . . . What is that? A question? A chuckle?

Nelson? Do you stir? Would you enjoy a ticket to this final festival? Why, then you shall have one, if you be able to use it. I have not felt such enthusiasm from you in ages. Come then to me if you can. I touch the bone, your skull. I summon you, lord, my mentor, to this place and time, Nelson, for you were always my master in the matter of killing Alices. It is fitting that you be present when the collection is made complete. Come to me now, Nelson, out of darkness. This spectacle is yours. By bone, siphon, and dot, I summon you! Come!

20

They came to Ubar, city of Shaddad ibn Ad, to be called Iram in the Koran, oasis town of lofty pillars, "the like of which were not produced in the land." Alice's hair was red now, and she wore a white garment and a light veil upon her face; Kalifriki had on his kimono and sandals, a cloth about his eyes, his bow upon his back, laquered case beside it containing a single arrow.

Passing amid a sea of tents, they made their way down avenues lined with merchants, traders, beggars, to the sound of camel bells, gusts of wind, and the rattle of palm fronds. Conversation, song, and invective sounded about them in a double-dozen tongues. They came at last to the great-gated pillars through which they passed, entering into the town proper, where the splashing sounds of fountains came to them from within adobe-walled gardens; and white-stuccoed buildings gleamed in the morning sun, bands of blue, green, red, and yellow tiles adorning their palace-high walls.

"I seem to recall the dining area of the inn as being located in a kind of grotto," Kalifriki said, "within a rocky hillside, with the rest of the establishment constructed right, left, and forward of it, using the face of the hillside as a rear wall."

"That is correct," she said. "The cavern keeps the place cool by day. The cooking fires are well vented to the rear. You descend four or five stone steps on entering, bearing to the right—"

"Where is the mirror located?"

"On the wall to the left as you go in, below the steps."

"Metal, isn't it?"

"Brass or bronze—I forget."

"Then let us go in, be seated, have a cooling drink, and make certain that everything is still this way. On the way out, pause and investigate the mirror as you pretend to study your appearance. Lower the veil as you do so. If it attempts to draw you through, I will be near enough for you to take my hand. If it does not, turn away as if you are about to depart. Then return, as in afterthought, and employ that transport sequence you learned from your predecessors."

"Yes. There is the place up ahead now," she said.

He followed, and she took him in.

21

See, Nelson? They are at the Garden of Frozen Beings now, place of your own design, if you recall—though in your

original plan it was only for display. I came across it in an odd memory cache. See how cunningly it is wrought? It holds your studies of living things from a dozen worlds, in all sizes and colors, set upon many levels, in many interesting poses. Impossible not to pass among several at any given time. I added the Series Perilous.

I took an Alice here, crushed by the blue spiral, eighth from the left—where she lay long in two pieces, gasping—for not calculating the death sequence correctly; and one back at Endway's Shoot, smeared to a long streak, though barely noticeable upon the red-stone; and another well flayed and diced in the crystal forest, by my *abor decapitans*.

The first three, which you managed yourself—before your second disorientation—were so much more elegantly done. . . .

22

Finishing their drinks, Kalifriki and Alice rose and crossed the refreshment area. They passed the metal mirror and mounted the steps. At the threshold, she paused.

"A moment," she said. "I want to check my hair in that mirror we passed."

Returning down the stair, she produced a comb. At the mirror, she made a quick adjustment of several stray tresses, letting her veil fall as she did so.

Kalifriki stood behind her. "We must be at least part-way entered before I shift," he whispered, "if I am to lay the thread in that universe so as to benefit our course through it. Remember what I said of the phenomenon. Whenever you are ready . . ."

"Good," she said, putting away her comb, turning toward the door.

Three beats later she turned back, lips set in a tight line, raising her hand, touching upon the reflecting surface. After a moment, she located the pulses, passed her hand through the activation sequence.

As her fingers penetrated the interface, Kalifriki, behind her, placed his hand upon her shoulder, following a small squeeze from her free hand.

Her entire arm passed through the interface, and Kalifriki took them to the Valley of Frozen Time, where he removed his blindfold. He regarded the thread's passage through the placeless time into the timeless place. Its twistings were complicated, the nexuses of menace manifold. Alice tried to speak to him, not knowing that words, like wind or music, could not manifest in this place of sculpture, painting, map. Twisting the thread, he flicked it three times, to see it settle at last into the most appropriate bessel functions he could manage under the circumstances, racing ahead to meet himself down thoroughfares of worlds-yet-to-be, and even as it plied its bright way he felt the tug of Time Thawing, replaced his blindfold, and set his hand again upon Alice's shoulder, to feel them drawn back to the waters of a small lake in the toy universe of the collector of Alices, piecemeal, who must even now be wondering at their interrupted passage.

Good of you to have summoned me back to my world, Aidon. What have you done to it? What are these silly games you have been about? Aidon, Aidon. . . . Is this how you read my intention? Did you really think the bitches worth the concerted efforts of an entire universe, to crush them in manners you found esthetically gratifying? Did you think I wanted to construct a theme amusement park? You profane the memory of the woman I love. You should have taken instruction from my disposition of the first three. There was a point to those—a very important point. One which you have been neglecting.

Lord, Nelsor, master, my mentor. I am sorry if the program is faulty. I had it that the killing of Alices was the highest value in the universe, as taken from your own example. See! See how this one must scramble, to avoid the banging twar? She has generalized the experience of two of her sisters, to learn it is not the twar nor the twar's physical position that matters, but rather that position in the sequence of encounters. She had to abstract the series from the previous deaths. See how she must scramble—and her companion after her—to dodge the falling frogbart, leap high above the lower limb of the glide? When the bropplies rolled around them she knew just how to dive—and to stand perfectly still till the wonjut exhausted its energies. See where the jankel has cut her arm? And even now she must pass the way of the vum. There is fine sport in her gasping, her bleeding, the tearing of her garments, in seeing the sweat pour from her. And the slyth yet remains, and the fangrace-pair. Tell me how this differs from the doomed races where you ran the earlier Alices. How have I mistaken your intent? When you ceased being able to function I was proud to take on your role. I am sorry if—

Aidon, it broke me to do as I did with the first three. I retreated into my second madness over my actions, still unsatisfied. Worse than unsatisfied, actually. I hated them, true, and it made it easier to do what I had to, to learn certain things. Still, it hurt me, also, especially in that I did not learn what I wished, though it narrowed the field. You should have summoned me for the fourth, the fifth, the sixth. There was data that I required there—lost to me now!

Not so, lord! For I recorded them! You can summon them! Have them back! Deal with them further! I have done it many times—for practice. I even bring in outsiders for fresh rites. I have performed the ritual of the dying Alices over and over in your name—hoping to effect your repair in the reenactment. I have been faithful to your procedure—What? You have not employed that command mode since ship-time. . . . You would retire me? Do not! There is an important thing I have yet to tell you! I—

Go away, Aidon. Go away. I would rid myself of your bumbling presence, for you have offended me. Let us say that it was an honest mistake. Still, I no longer wish to have you about, chortling over my undertakings, misreading all my actions, distracting me with your apologies. Before you fade entirely, see how I dismantle your remaining stations of blood. It is not games that I desire

of the scarred lady I hate. But you are right in one thing. I will have the others back, as you recorded them—messy though the prospect be. She will follow the thread of a new course to the Place of Facing Skulls. By dot, bone, and siphon, this one will give me what I want. Go away, Aidon. Go away.

Come back to the Killing Ground, Alice, my last. The rules you've learned no longer apply. Keep calling to me. You shall have my answer, a piece at a time.

24

Provoking the *fangrace-pair* to attack simultaneously, Alice left them tangled in each other's many limbs. Passing behind the nearer then, she led Kalifriki to a narrow bridge which took them above a canyon whose bottom was lost in blackness. Achieving its farther side, she took him down a twisting way beneath an evening sky of dark blue wherein lights that were not stars burned unblinking at near distances. Vivid, against the darkness, an incandescent rainbow took form.

"Strange," she muttered.

"What?" Kalifriki asked.

"There was never a rainbow here before."

"And is night, is it not?" Kalifriki asked.

"Yes. It began darkening as we entered that last place."

"In some traditions on Earth a rainbow is the sign of a new covenant," Kalifriki said.

"If that is the message, it is more cryptic than communicative," she said.

Suddenly, the faint sounds of female voices which had been with them constantly since their arrival rose in volume. From sighs to wailings, they had been shaped somehow into a slow, eerie tune which rose and fell as if working toward an ominous crescendo it never quite reached, returning constantly to begin again, yet another variation on plaints of pain, punctuated with staccato bursts of hysterical laughter.

A cool wind came by, gusting among the high rocks amid which they moved. On several occasions, the ground shook beneath their feet.

Reaching the end of their downward way and turning to the left, Alice beheld a deep crater in which a lake of orange lava boiled, flames darting above it, casting its light upon the high, piped walls which surrounded it. Their trail split here, an arm of it going in either direction about the lake's oval perimeter, cinder-strewn between its jagged shores and the rise of the organpipe walls.

Alice halted.

"What is the matter?" Kalifriki asked.

"A burning lake," she said. "It wasn't here before."

"What was?"

"A maze, full of pits and deadfalls, flooded periodically with rushing torrents."

"What now?"

"I suppose we must choose a way and go on, to find the place of which I told you that first night over dinner—the place we have glimpsed but never quite reached. There are bones there, and an open wall. I think it is the place of the singularity. Which way should I go?"

"Let us trust to the falling of the thread. Find a random way to choose."

She stooped and picked up a pebble. Turning, she cast it, hard, back in the direction from which they had come. It struck against the rock wall and bounded back. It rolled past them to the right.

"Right," she said, and they turned and took up their way again, in that direction.

The trail was perhaps six feet in width, light from the blazing cauldron to their left casting their shadows grotesquely upon the fluted wall. The way curved in and out as they went; and they felt the heat—painfully, after a time—upon their left sides. Dark fumes obscured the starlike lights in the sky, though the rainbow still glowed brightly. The chorus of pained voices was partly muted by the popping and crackling from below, by the faint roaring that came in undertone.

As they rounded a bend they heard a moaning.

"Alice . . ." came a soft call from the right.

She halted.

Bleeding from countless cuts, one leg missing from below the knee, the other from above it, left arm dangling by a thread of flesh, a woman who resembled her lay upon a low ledge to the right, face twisted in the orange glow, her remaining eye focused upon them.

"Alice—don't—go—on," she gasped. "It—is—awful. Kill me—quickly—please. . . ."

"What happened? What did this to you?" Alice asked.

"The tree—tree of glass—by the lake."

"But that is far. How did you get here?"

"Don't know," came the reply. "Why is it—so? What—have we done?"

"I don't know."

"Kill me."

"I cannot."

"Please. . . ."

Kalifriki moved forward. Alice did not see what he did. But she knew, and the broken lady did not call to them again.

They passed on in silence then, the lake growing more turbulent as they moved, now shooting great fountains of fire and molten material high into the air. The heat and fumes grew more oppressive. Periodically, niches glowed again in the wall to their right, wherein bleeding Alices stood, eyes staring, unseeing, straight ahead, lips twisting in their song which rose in intensity now, overcoming the lake's roaring. Whenever they approached these figures, however, they faded, though the song remained.

Then, in the flaring light, as they neared the far end of the trail, Alice beheld a rough area amid the cinders and congealed slag. She slowed, as she realized that the mangled remains of a human body were smeared before her, still somehow stirring. She halted when she saw the half-crushed head beside the way.

Its lips moved, and a wavy voice said, "Give him what he wants, that I may know peace."

"What—What is it that he wants?" she asked.

"You know," it gasped. "You know. Tell him!"

Then the lake bubbled and roared more loudly. A great strand of flame and lava leaped above it and fell

toward them. Alice retreated quickly, pushing Kalifriki backward behind her. The fiery mass fell across the trail, obliterating the remains, draining, fuming, back into the lake. When it was gone, the ground smoking before them, the remains of the dead Alice had vanished, also.

They halted, waiting for the way to cool, and Kalifriki asked, "What is this knowledge of which she spoke?"

"I—I'm not certain," Alice replied.

"I've a feeling," Kalifriki said, "the question will be repeated in more specific and equally colorful terms at some point."

"I'd guess you're right," she told him.

Shortly, they walked on, treading quickly across the ravaged area, beneath the rainbow, the song suddenly reaching a higher pitch of wailing as they went.

As they neared the farther end of the lake, another molten spume reached near at hand. Alice halted, waiting to see in which direction the flashing tower might topple. But it stood, swaying, for a long while, almost as if trying to decide the matter itself. It took on a spiraling twist for a while before abruptly falling toward the wall perhaps twenty paces ahead of them.

They retreated even farther as this occurred. The spume fell in slow motion above the trail, its tip touching the wall, whence it flowed downward to the right-hand trail's edge. Its upper portion remained in place, ten or twelve feet overhead, spirals working through it in two directions, braiding themselves now into a sputtering yellow-orange fretwork of light and molten material. The archway thus formed ceased its swaying and stood pulsing before them.

"We suddenly have a burning gate ahead of us," Alice stated.

"Is there any other way to proceed?" Kalifriki asked.

"No," she said.

"Then it would seem we have little choice."

"True. I just wanted you to know the nature of this encounter."

"Thank you. I am ready."

They moved ahead, and the archway maintained its position as they approached. Passing beneath it, the air was filled with crackling sounds and the prospect wavered. Alice's next step took her onto a rough silvery way with nothing about her but the starlike lights. Another pace, and Kalifriki had passed through also, the gateway vanishing behind him.

It was not a continuous surface upon which they stood, but rather a forty-foot span of about the same width as the trail they had quitted. It ended abruptly in all directions. Looking downward over its edge, she saw, at a distance impossible to estimate, the twisted surface of the land they had been traversing, cracked, pierced, brightly pied, monoliths darting about its surface, the rainbow still arched above it; and even as she watched, it seemed to change shape, lakes flowing into valleys, flames leaping up out of shadows and crests, new jigsaw pieces of color replacing old ones with less than perfect fit. And about them, still, rang the plaints of the dead Alices. She moved ahead, toward the farther end of the silver way.

"We're high above the land," she said, "walking on

the surface of a narrow asteroid. It is like a broken-out piece of a bridge. I'm heading toward its farther end."

"Alice," Kalifriki said as they began to move again, "I have a question."

"What is it?"

"Did you come to Earth on the first vessel or the second?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"You said that Nelsor and four clones came here and had their trouble. Then later, his Alice, learning of this, made the voyage with the three remaining clones, yourself among them."

"Did I? I don't recall exactly how I phrased it."

"Then, when you told me of your bedroom encounter with Nelsor, it sounded as if you, he, and the original Alice all made a single journey together."

"Oh. That happened on a different voyage, elsewhere."

"I see," Kalifriki said, matching her pace.

Tenuous wisps of fog swept by them as they walked, followed by larger puffs. Something massive drifted downward from overhead, possibly on a collision course, possibly about to miss them. It was of about the same shape and albedo as the thing on which they moved.

"Another asteroid headed this way," she reported. "A bit of fog's come by, too."

"Let's keep going to the end."

"Yes."

Just as they reached the extremity of their way, the second piece of spanning slid into place before them and remained there, as if joined with their own. This one curved to the left.

"We've acquired an extension," she said. "I'm going to continue along it."

"Do so."

Several additional pieces moved by as they walked—one of them the section they had quitted, removing itself from the rear and drifting forward to join them again ahead.

"It's extending itself down toward a cloud bank," she told him, as she peered in the new direction it was taking. Then, too, they seemed to be moving, relative to the overall form of the shifting panorama below.

She crossed to another section. The clouds came on quickly; they were of soft pink, pale blue, light lime, streaked through each other in delicate abstract waves.

Several hundred paces later she heard a scream. Halt ing, and looking to the right, whence it seemed to have come, she beheld nothing but clouds. She began to gnaw at her lower lip as the cry was repeated.

"What is it?" Kalifriki asked.

"I don't know."

Then the clouds parted, and she saw a pair of drifting boulders but a few feet distant. The upper torso, head, and shoulders of a woman resembling herself lay sprawled upon the left-hand stone. Severed from these and occupying the slightly lower right-hand one lay the rest of her, twitching.

"Alice!" the figure cried. "He would know which of us was responsible. None of us could tell him. That leaves only you. Tell him what happened, for mercy's sake!"

Then the two rocks flew off in opposite directions

and the clouds closed in again. Kalifriki could feel Alice shaking.

"If you know whatever it is he wants," he said, "perhaps you should tell him. It may make life a lot easier."

"Perhaps I do and perhaps I don't," she said. "I suppose I'll learn when I'm asked a direct question. Oh!"

"What? What is it?"

"Nelsor. I reached him for a moment. Or he reached me. He is gone now."

"Could you tell anything about his condition?"

"He seemed a mix of emotions. Happy that I was coming—in some other way disturbed. I don't know."

They walked again. The singing went on, and periodically they could feel the vibrations as new pieces of their twisted passageway through the sky assembled themselves. The colored fogs parted and came together again, flirting with her vision, providing tantalizing glimpses of some vantage that lay far ahead.

Their way seemed telescoped from break to break in their passage through the fog. Suddenly, Alice halted, sufficing, saying "Stop!" sharply.

"What is it?" Kalifriki asked.

"End of the trail, for the moment," she replied. "It just stops here. We are at the edge, and I am looking down again, through a thinning fog, at the distant land. The fog at our sides is dissipating now, too. That which is ahead of us is still thick. A redness flows through it."

They waited, and the red mist passed by degrees, revealing, first, an almost sculpted-seeming rocky prominence, pointed centrally, descending symmetrically at either hand and curving forward into a pair of gray-blue stony shoulders, and before them a flat yellow oval of sandy stone, raised above lesser steplike formations, irregular, more blue than gray, descending into mist. To the rear, set within the bulk of the prominence, a shelf-like niche was recessed at shoulder height; and at the oval's approximate center lay a well, a low wall of red stone blocks about its mouth. Another structured wall—this one of black stone—stood to the far left and downward of the oval, perhaps twenty feet in length, eight in height. Chains hung upon it. And this entire vision seemed to be quivering, as through a heat-haze.

More of the mist blew away, and the lines of the lower slopes came into view. Watching, as the last of it fled, Alice saw that the base of the entire prominence was an abruptly terminated thing, at about twice the height's distance below the oval, jagged blue icicles hanging beneath, as if a frozen mountaintop had been torn loose and hurled into space to hover against the blackness and the unblinking points of light; and now she could see that the rainbow's end lay within the oval.

Despite this clearing, the entire monumental affair still seemed to be vibrating.

"What is it?" Kalifriki asked at last.

Slowly, she began describing it to him.

within the well of the dot because another singularity is approaching—also a second peculiar item, of energy and negative field pressure trapped within a tube. Please acknowledge. This is a serious matter. I understand now what it was about the monk which first troubled me. Here at the center of things I can feel it clearly. He is very dangerous and should be removed from our universe at once. Release me and I will deal with him immediately. Acknowledge, Nelsor! Acknowledge! There is danger here!

Oh. The other thing I wanted to tell you concerns the first Alice. I had located some small memory caches for her. They were inadvertently recorded because of a peculiar conflict situation. Nelsor, I am going to begin pushing against this retirement program if you do not answer me. . . .

26

Alice stared at the vibrating landscape in the sky. A final span of bridge came drifting in slowly from her right, streaming colors as it passed through the rainbow. The voices of her dead sisters ceased, and only the wind that blows between the worlds could be heard in its chill passage.

"It is called the Killing Ground," she said then. "It has been transferred here from another location since my last visit. It is the final place."

"You never referred to it so before," Kalifriki said.

"I only just learned the name. I have reached Nelsor again. Or he has reached me. He bids me cross over. He says, 'Come back to the Killing Ground, Alice, my last.'"

"I thought you had never been to the final place."

"I told you I had glimpsed it."

As the last piece of bridge slid into place, connecting their span with the lowest step beneath the oval, she saw the vibrations shake loose a small white object from the niche. With a sudden clarity of vision, she discerned it to be a skull. It bounced, then rolled, coming to rest in the sand near a spreading red stain.

"Kalifriki," she said, "I am afraid. He is changed. Everything is changed. I don't want to cross over to that place."

"I don't believe I can get us out at this point," Kalifriki said. "I feel we are bound too tightly to my initial disposition of the thread, back in the Valley of Frozen Time, to employ it otherwise here. We must pass through whatever lies ahead, or be stopped by it."

"Please make certain," she asked, licking her lips. "He is calling again. . . ."

27

Alice, Alice, Alice. You must be the one. It could have been none of the other wasted ladies. Even if Aidon fumbled in his approach by not putting the questions, there should have been some lapse on their part, some betrayal of the truth, should there not? The guilty one would not even have come in. . . . Why, why are you here at all? And that stranger at your side. . . . What is your plan?

If it is you, why are you here? I am troubled. I must put you the questions. Why did you come back, Alice my last? It must be you . . . mustn't it? And why do you hesitate now? Come back to the Killing Ground, where her blood stains the sand and our skills lie in constant testimony to the crime. Come back. No? Then I call upon the siphon to bear you to me, here in the last place, beside the well of the dot that is the center of the universe. Even now it snakes forth. You *will* come to me, Alice, here and now, on this most holy ground of truth. I reach for you. You cannot resist—

Not now, Aidon. Not now. Go back. Go back. I have retired you. Go back.

It comes for you, Alice.

28

"I am sorry," Kalifriki said. "It is as I told you."

Staring ahead, Alice saw a black line emerge from the well, lash about, grow still, then move again, rising, swaying in her direction, lengthening. . . .

"The siphon," she said. "A piece of ship's equipment. Very versatile. He is sending it for me."

"Is it better to wait for it or go on?"

"I would rather walk than be dragged. Perhaps he will not employ it if I come on my own."

She began moving again. The black hose, which had been approaching, snake-like, halted its advance as she came toward it down the final length of silver. When she came up in front of it, it retreated. Step by step then, it withdrew before her. She hesitated a moment when she came to the end of the span. It leaned slightly toward her. At this, she took another step. It backed off immediately.

"We're here," she said to Kalifriki. "There are several ledges now, like a rough stairway, to climb."

She began mounting them, and as soon as she reached the flat sandy area the siphon withdrew entirely, back into the well. She continued to advance, looking about. She came to the well, halted, and peered down into it.

"We are at the well," she said, and Kalifriki removed his hand from her shoulder and reached down to feel along its wall. "It goes all the way through this—asteroid," she continued. "The dot—the black hole—is down there at its center. The siphon is coiled about the inner perimeter, near to the lip. It shrinks, so that one circuit is sufficient to house it. Below, I can see the bright swirling of the disc. It is far down inside—perhaps midway."

"So this place is being eaten, down at its center," Kalifriki said. "I wonder if that is the cause of the vibration?"

She walked on, past the red stain and the skull, to regard the niche from which the skull had tumbled. Another skull rested there, far to the right, and a collection of pincers, tongs, drills, hammers, and chains lay in the middle area.

"Torture tools here," she observed.

Kalifriki, in the meantime, was pacing about the area, touching everything he encountered. Finally, he stopped beside the well. Looking back, Alice saw that the rainbow fell upon his shoulders.

Then, above the sighing of the wind, there came a voice.

"I am going to kill you, Alice," it said. "Very slowly and very terribly."

"Why?" she asked.

The voice seemed to be coming from the vicinity of the skull. It was, as she recalled it, the voice of Nelsor.

"All of the others are dead," he said. Now it is your turn. Why did you come back?"

"I came here to help you," she said, "if I could."

"Why?" he asked, and the skull turned over so that the empty sockets faced her.

"Because I love you," she replied.

There came a dry chuckling sound.

"How kind of you," he said then. "Let us have a musical accompaniment to that tender sentiment. Alices, give us a song."

Immediately, the awful plaint began again, this time from near at hand. To her right, six nude duplicates of herself suddenly hung in chains upon the black wall. They were bruised but un mutilated. Their eyes did not focus upon any particular objects as they began to shriek and wail. At the end of their line hung a final set of chains.

"When I have done with you, you shall join my chorus," Nelsor's voice went on.

"Done?" she said, raising a pair of pliers from the ledge and replacing it. "Employing things such as this?"

"Of course," he replied.

"I love you, Nelsor."

"That should make it all the more interesting."

"You are mad."

"I don't deny it."

"Could you forget all this and let me help you?"

"Forget? Never. I am in control here. And it is not your love or your help that I seek."

She looked at Kalifriki, and he removed the bow from his shoulder and strung it. Then he opened the case and withdrew its arrow, the spectrum blazing upon its tip.

"If your friend wishes to punch a hole in my head, that is all right with me. It will not let out the evil spirits, though."

"Is it possible for you to rebody yourself and come away with me?" she asked.

Again, the laugh.

"I shall not leave this place, and neither shall you," he said.

Kalifriki set the arrow to the bowstring.

"Not now, Aidon!" Nelsor shouted. Then, "Or perhaps your friend would shoot an arrow down the well to destroy the dot?" he said. "If he can, by all means bid him do so. For destroying the universe is the only thing I know to protect you from my wrath."

"You heard him, Kalifriki," she said.

Kalifriki drew back upon the bowstring.

"You are a fool," Nelsor said, "to bring—of all things—an archer here to destroy me . . . one of the legendary ones, I gather, who need not even see the target . . . against a dead man and a black hole."

Kalifriki turned suddenly, leaning back, arrow pointed somewhere overhead.

" . . . And a disoriented one, at that," he added.

Kalifriki held this position, his body vibrating in time with the ground.

"You are a doomed, perverse fool," Nelsor said, "and I will use your sisters in your questioning through pain, in testament against you. They will rend you, stretch you, dislocate you, crack your bones."

There came a sound of chains rattling against stone. The chorus was diminished by half as the restraints fell from three of the Alices and their singing ceased. At that moment, their eyes focused upon her, and they began to move forward.

"Let it begin," he said, "in this place of bloody truth."

Kalifriki released his arrow, upward. Bearing its dark burden, the Dagger of Rama sped high and vanished into the blackness.

29

Nelsor! She has brought with her a being capable of destroying our universe, and it is possible that he just has. I must perform some massive calculations to confirm my suspicion—but in the meantime our survival depends upon our acting as if it is correct. We cannot return to our alpha point and start again if I am destroyed. And if I am destroyed you are destroyed, along with this place and all of your Alices. We are facing the end of the world! I must confer with you immediately!

30

The three Alices advanced upon the first stair.

31

Aidon! Whatever it is, this is not the time for it! I am finally arrived at the moment for which I have waited all these years. I find your importunities distracting. Whatever it is, deal with it yourself, as you would. I will not be interrupted till I have done with this Alice. Stay away from me until then!

32

The three Alices mounted the first step. At their back, their sisters' song reached a new pitch, as if the crescendo might finally be attained.

33

Very well, Nelsor. I shall act. First Alice, I summon what remains of you. By bone, dot, and siphon, I call you to embodiment upon the Killing Ground! Perhaps you can reason with him.

34

Alice glanced at her three sisters, approaching now upon

the farther stair. Kalifriki lowered his bow and unbraced it, slung it. He reached up then and removed the bandage from his eyes.

"Nelsor, listen to me," Alice said. "Aidon will be destroyed. So will the programs which maintain your own existence—unless you reembody and shift your entire consciousness back into human form. Do that and come away with me, for this place is doomed. No matter what our differences, we can resolve them and be happy again. I will take good care of you."

"Again?" Nelsor said. "When were we ever subject to mutual happiness? I do not understand you, clone. What I do not understand most, however, is why one of you killed my wife. And I feel strongly that it was you, Alice my last. Would you care to comment on this?"

From somewhere, a bell began to ring.

"Who sounds the ship's alert?" he cried.

"Probably Aidon," she responded, "as it realizes the truth of what I have been saying."

"You have not yet answered my question," he said. "Did you kill my wife?"

The second skull fell from the niche, rolled to the bloody area near to the first. The bell continued to ring. The voices of the three chained Alices rose and rose.

She grimaced. The other Alices mounted another step.

"It was self-defense," she said. "She attacked me. I had no desire to harm her."

"Why would she attack you?"

"She was jealous—of us."

"What? How could that be? There was nothing between us."

"But there was," she said. "You once mistook me for her, and we had our pleasure of it."

"Why did you permit it?"

"For you," she said. "I wanted to comfort you in your need. I love you."

"Then it could have gone by and been forgotten. How did she learn of it?"

"I told her, when she singled me out for reprimand over something one of the others had done. She slapped me and I slapped her back. Soon we were fighting on the ground, here—when this place was elsewhere. She struck me about the head with a tool she had at her belt. This is why I wear these scars. I thought she would kill me. But there was a rock nearby. I raised it and swung it. I was not trying to kill her, only to save myself."

"So you are the one."

"We are the same. You know that. Down to the cellar level. Down to the genes. You cannot have her back. Have me instead. I am the same flesh. You could not tell the difference then. It will feel the same now. And I will be better to you than she ever was. She was rude, imperious, egotistical. Come back. Come away with me, Nelsor my love. I will care for you always."

He screamed, and the three Alices halted at the top of the stair.

Slowly, a haze formed about the skull which faced her.

"Go back, Alices. Go back," he said. "I will deal with her myself."

The skull fell backward—now somewhat more than a

skull, as the outlines of features had occurred about it in the haze—and a wavering began beneath it, delineating the form of a body, pulsing it into greater definition. Beside it, however, a similar phenomenon began to invest the second skull. The three Alices at the edge of the oval turned away, began walking back down the stair just as their sisters hit and ran the crescendo, voices changing from wailing to pure song. The three never returned to the wall, however, but faded from sight before they reached the bottom stair. At that time, the chains rang against the wall, and Kalifriki saw that the others had vanished as well.

Shortly, the nude form of a dark-haired, short-bearded man of medium stature took shape, breathing slowly, upon the sand. Beside him, another Alice came into focus, grew more and more substantial.

"You did not tell me the full story," Kalifriki said as they watched.

"I told you everything essential to the job. Would more detail have changed anything?"

"Perhaps," he said. "You fled after the fight, and this is your first time back then, correct?"

"Yes," she said.

"So you were not party to the other six Alices' journeys to this place, save that you monitored them to learn what you could of it."

"That's right."

"You might have warned them that any of them would be suspect. And after the first of them died you knew Nelsor's state of mind. You let your sisters go to their deaths without trying to stop them."

She looked away.

"I would have done no good," she said. "They were determined to resolve the matter. And you must remember that they were monitoring, too. After the first death, they were as aware as I was of his state of mind, and of the danger."

"Why didn't you stop the first one?"

"I was . . . weak," she said. "I was afraid. It would have meant telling them my story. They might have restrained me, to send me home for trial."

"You wished to take the place of the first Alice."

"I can't deny it."

"I suppose that is her upon the ground now."

"Who else could it be?"

Nelsor and the new Alice opened their eyes at about the same time.

"Is it you?" Nelsor asked softly.

"Yes," she answered.

Nelsor raised himself onto his elbows, sat up.

"So long . . ." he said. "It has been so long."

She smiled and sat up. In a moment they were in each other's arms. When they parted and she spoke again, her words were slurred:

"Aidon—message for you—to me gave," she said. He rose to his feet, helped her to hers.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Portant, 'im, to talk to. World ending. Arrow."

"It is nothing," Nelsor said. "He shot it off in the wrong direction. What is wrong with you?"

"Cur-va-ture. Perfect vector," she said, "to cir-cum-navigate small our uni-verse. Back soon. Other way."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "It's just an arrow."

She shook her head.

"It bears—an-other—dot."

"What? It's carrying a singularity around the universe on a collision course with Aidon?"

She nodded.

He turned away from her, to face Kalifriki.

"This is true?" he asked.

"This is true," Kalifriki replied.

"I don't believe it."

"Wait awhile," he said.

"It still won't destroy Aidon."

"Perhaps not, but it will destroy the programmed accretion disc and probably wreck your world that it holds together."

"What did she pay you to do this?"

"A lot," he said. "I don't kill for nothing if I can help it."

"The conscience of a mercenary," Nelsor said.

"I never killed three women who were trying to help me—for nothing."

"You don't understand."

"No. Is that because we're all aliens? Or is it something else?"

Just then, the new-risen Alice screamed. Both men turned their heads. She had wandered to the niche where her skull had lain, and only then seemed to notice her scarred clone standing nearby.

"You!" she cried. "Hurt me!"

She snatched the hammer from the ledge and rushed toward the clone. The Alice dodged her assault, reached for her wrist and missed, then pushed her away.

"She's damaged," Nelsor said, moving forward. "She's not responsible...."

The original Alice recovered and continued her attack as Nelsor rushed toward them. Again, the other dodged and pushed, struck, pushed again. The incomplete Alice staggered backward, recovered her footing, screamed, swung the hammer again as her double moved to close with her.

Nelsor was almost upon them, when a final push carried her backward to strike her calves against the lip of the well.

He was wellside in an instant, reaching, reaching, leaning, and catching hold of her wrist. He continued to lean, was bent forward, fell. He disappeared into the well with her, their cries echoing back for several seconds, then ceasing abruptly.

"Lost!" the remaining Alice cried. "She has taken him from me!"

Kalifriki moved to the edge of the well and looked downward.

"Another case of self-defense," he said, "against the woman you wished to replace."

"Woman?" she said, moving forward. "She was incomplete, barely human. And you saw her attack me."

He nodded.

"Was it Nelsor you really wanted?" he said. "Or this? To be the last, the only, the mistress—the original?"

Tears ran down her cheeks.

"No, I loved him," she said.

"The feeling, apparently, was not mutual."

"You're wrong!" she said. "He did care!"

"As a clone. Not as his woman. Give up the memory. You are your own person now. Come! We should be leaving. I don't know exactly when—"

"No!" she cried, and the ground shook and the chains rattled. "No! I am mistress here now, and I will rebody him without memory of her! I will summon the three recorded clones to serve us. The others were witness. We shall dwell here together and make of it a new world. We can bring in what we choose, create what we need—"

"It is too late for that," Kalifriki said. "You brought me here to destroy a universe and I did. Even if it could be saved, you cannot dwell on the Killing Ground forever. It is already destroying you. Come away now. Find a new life—"

"No!" she answered. "I rule here! Even now, I take control of Aidon! I remember the command modes! I have reached him! I hold this universe in my hand! I can alter the very physical constants! I can warp space itself to turn your silly arrow away! Behold! I have digested its flight!"

The lights in the sky flickered for the first time and jumped to new positions.

"Change the topology and the geodesic will follow," Kalifriki said. "The Dagger of Rama will still find you. Come away!"

"You! You have hated me all along for what I am! As soon as I told you I was a clone you knew I was something less than the rest of you! But I can destroy you now, assassin! For I am mistress of the dot! I can wish you away in any manner I choose! There is no defense!"

"So it comes to that again," he said. "You *would* have me pin my thread against a singularity."

She laughed wildly.

"There is no contest there," she said. "You have already described the entanglement that would result. I believe I will burn you—"

Kalifriki moved his wrist, slowly, to a position above the well.

"What are you doing?" she said. "How can you interfere with my omniscience? My omnipotence? You can't touch me!"

"I told you that the circumference of the thread is less than a full circle," he stated. "I am cutting out a wedge from your disc."

"That close? You can't. If the warp extends to the hole you would violate thermodynamics. A black hole cannot shrink."

"No," he said. "The thread would probably be caused to deliver energy to replace it and increase the mass and the radius in compensation. But I am being careful not to let it stray so near, and not to have to test this hypothesis. My sense is extended along it."

"Then you will not die by fire," she said, slurring her words slightly. "By bone—dot—and siphon—I summon you! Sisters! Destroy this man!"

Kalifriki's head jerked to the left, the direction of her gaze.

The three Alices whose eyes focused were flickering into existence across the oval from him. Slowly, he withdrew his wrist beyond the well's wall.

"Kill him!" she said. "Before he kills us! Hurry!"

The three Alices moved, wraithlike, even before they were fully embodied, rainbow's light passing through them as they came on.

Solidifying before they arrived, they rushed past Kalifriki, to attack the one who had summoned them.

"Murderess!" one of them cried.

"Liar!" shrieked another.

"Cause of all our pain!" screamed the third.

The scarred Alice retreated, and Kalifriki shook out his thread so that it fell among them. A wall of flame rose up between the Alices and their victim.

"There is no time," he called out, "to stain this ground further! We must depart!"

He moved the thread to enclose the three Alices.

"I am taking them with me," he said. "You come, too! We must go!"

"No!" she answered, eyes flashing. "I will shunt your arrow! I will move this place itself! I will warp space even more!" The lights in the sky winked again, danced again. "I will avoid your doom, archer! I will—rebuild! I will—have—him—back! I—am—mistress—here—now! Begone! I—banish—the—lot—of—you!"

Kalifriki retreated with the three ladies, to the Valley of Frozen Time. There, in the place that is sculpture, paint-

ing, map, he laid his way home. He could not speak to explain this, for this was not a place for words (nor wind, music, cries, wailing), nor they to thank him, were that their wish. And while scarred Alice stood upon the Killing Ground and invoked the powers of dot, siphon, and bone against the rushing Dagger of Rama as it cut its way around the universe, Kalifriki transported the three Alices from the land behind the mirror in vanished Ubar, taking them with him to his villa near the sea, though he feared them, knowing that he could never favor one over the others. But that was a problem to be dealt with at another time, for the ways of the thread are full of arrivals and departures, and even its master cannot digest its flight fully.

35

Alice at the end of the rainbow stands upon the red stain and watches the sky. The siphon brings her nourishment as she plies powers against powers in her contest with the inexorable doom she has loosed. A dark-haired, short-bearded man of medium stature sits upon the edge of the well and seems to watch her. Occasionally, she takes her pleasure of him and he tells her whatever she wishes to hear. She returns, refreshed then, to her duel, though it sometimes feels as if the circle of her universe no longer possesses 360 degrees. . . . ♦



Having arrived early, Harv debates jumping ahead to the Symposium on "Type A Personalities and Their Incidence in Temporal Research" . . . or gritting out the remaining six seconds

Passion Play

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Roger Zelazny

At the end of the season of sorrows comes the time of rejoicing. Spring, like the hands of a well-oiled clock, noiselessly indicates this time. The average days of dimness and moisture decrease steadily in number, and those of brilliance and cool air begin to enter the calendar again. And it is good that the wet times are behind us, for they rust and corrode our machinery; they require the most intense standards of hygiene.

With all the right baggage of Spring, the days of the Festival arrive. After the season of Lamentations come the sacred stations of the Passion, then the bright Festival of Resurrection, with its tinkle and clatter,



Illustration by Polly Jackson

its exhaust fumes, scorched rubber, clouds of dust, and its great promise of happiness.

We come here every year, to the place, to replicate a classic. We see with our own lenses the functioning promise of our creation. The time is today, and I have been chosen.

Here on the sacred grounds of Le Mans I will perform every action of the classic which has been selected. Before the finale I will have duplicated every movement and every position which we know occurred. How fortunate! How high the honor!

Last year many were chosen, but it was not the same. Their level of participation was lower. Still, I had wanted so badly to be chosen! I had wished so strongly that I, too, might stand beside the track and await the flaming Mercedes.

But I was saved for this greater thing, and all lenses are upon me as we await the start. This year there is only one Car to watch—number 4, the Ferrari-analog.

The sign has been given, and the rubber screams; the smoke balloons like a giant cluster of white grapes, and we are moving. Another car gives way, so that I can drop into the proper position. There are many cars, but only one Car.

We scream about the turn, in this great Italian classic of two centuries ago. We run them all here, at the place, regardless of where they were held originally.

"Oh gone masters of creation," I pray, "let me do it properly. Let my timing be accurate. Let no random variable arise to destroy a perfect replication."

The dull gray metal of my arms, my delicate gyroscopes, my special gripping-hands, all hold the wheel in precisely the proper position, as we roar into the straightaway.

How wise the ancient masters were! When they knew they must destroy themselves in a combat too mystical and holy for us to understand, they left us these ceremonies, in commemoration of the Great Machine. All the data was there: the books, the films, all; for us to find, study, learn, to know the sacred Action.

As we round another turn, I think of our growing cities, our vast assembly lines, our lube-bars, and our beloved executive computer. How great all things are! What a well-ordered day! How fine to have been chosen!

The tires, little brothers, cry out, and the pinging of small stones comes from beneath. Three-tenths of a second, and I shall depress the accelerator an eighth of an inch further.

R-7091 waves to me as I enter the second lap, but I cannot wave back. My finest functioning is called for at this time. All the special instrumentation which has been added to me will be required in a matter of seconds.

The other cars give way at precisely the right instant. I turn, I slide. I crash through the guard rail.

"Turn over now, please!" I pray, twisting the wheel, "and burn."

Suddenly we are rolling, skidding, upside-down. Smoke fills the car.

To the crashing noise that roars within my receptors, the crackle and lick of flames is now added.

My steel skeleton—collapsed beneath the impact-stresses. My lubricants—burning. My lenses, all but for a tiny area—shattered.

My hearing-mechanism still functions weakly.

Now there is a great horn sounding, and metal bodies rush across the fields.

Now. Now is the time for me to turn off all my functions and cease.

But I will wait. Just a moment longer. I must hear them say it.

Metal arms drag me from the pyre. I am laid aside. Fire extinguishers play white rivers upon the Car.

Dimly, in the distance, through my smashed receptors, I hear the speaker rumble:

"Von Trips has smashed! The Car is dead!"

A great sound of lamenting arises from the rows of unmoving spectators. The giant fireproof van arrives on the field, just as the attendants gain control of the flames.

Four tenders leap out and raise the Car from the ground. A fifth collects every smouldering fragment.

And I see it all!

"Oh, let this not be blasphemy, please!" I pray. "One instant more!"

Tenderly, the Car is set within the van. The great doors close.

The van moves, slowly, bearing off the dead warrior, out through the gates, up the great avenue, and past the eager crowds.

To the great smelter. The Melting Pot!

To the place where it will be melted down, then sent out, a piece used to grace the making of each new person.

A cry of unanimous rejoicing arises on the avenue.

It is enough, that I have seen all this!

Happily, I turn myself off. ♦

With a Splash of Brilliant Images

Carl B. Yoke

When Roger Zelazny began to publish in the 1960s, he splashed his canvases with brilliant images and metaphors. He showered the science fiction world with similes. He created vivid and original stories. But most of all, he wove mythic elements into the basic fabric of his stories. There was panache, excitement, and promise in Zelazny's writing. An overnight sensation, readers waited breathlessly to see what he would do next.

The stories followed one another rapidly. Each was more stunning than its predecessor: "A Rose for Ecclesiastes"; "The Doors of His Face, The Lamps of His Mouth"; ". . . And Call Me Conrad" (expanded as *This Immortal*); "He Who Shapes" (expanded as *The Dream Master*); *Lord of Light*; and *Isle of the Dead*. These and other stories amassed an incredible twelve Hugo and Nebula nominations and won both awards twice between 1963 and 1969. Zelazny had arrived. He had created a signature.

Then things changed. Several critics labeled the period that followed a disappointment. They asked what had happened to Zelazny. Why hadn't he lived up to his promise? At least, that is how the question was phrased. What they really wanted to know was why Zelazny had not translated any more myths into science fiction.

Zelazny had relied heavily on myth. "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" used the "Briar Rose" fairy tale motif. "Doors of His Face" was a variation on the story of Job. *This Immortal*

had its roots in Greek myth. *The Dream Master* used Arthurian elements and the Scandinavian myth of *ragnarok*. And *Lord of Light* relied upon Hindu and Buddhist myth. In *Isle of the Dead*, Zelazny even attempted to create his own body of myth.

Why did Zelazny quit using myth? Why did he turn away from that which he had done so well?

The truth of the matter is that he didn't. Not exactly.

Zelazny was, and still is, an invertebrate experimenter. He likes to challenge himself. He likes to explore new techniques, new forms, new ideas. The creation of his own myths for *Isle of the Dead* is an example of that characteristic. Besides, Zelazny never simply translated a myth into science fiction or fantasy. He always transformed it—used those parts that fit his story while still maintaining the story's integrity. Never did he let a myth dictate what would happen next.

Moreover, though they defocused myth, the stories that followed still retained many very important, mythic qualities. They distanced the reader from the present, they exuded mystery, they hinted at the supernatural or supranormal, they suggested some sort of ultimate knowledge, and they made the individual feel secure because they struck a note that we all recognized as part of (or potentially part of) our own experience. By doing this, the themes of these stories became truly mythic

because they helped us to find significance or meaning in our lives. This, psychologists generally agree, is the ultimate purpose of myth.

In Zelazny's stories, more than those of most other writers of the fantastic, the search for meaning and significance is centered in his characters. One of the most distinctive qualities of his writing has been strong characterization, his ability to create characters in science fiction and fantasy that are more than cardboard cutouts.

Though his characters are always oversized (they either have supernormal abilities or some extraordinary physical ability), they are always psychologically credible. And, while they go off on some science-fictional or fantastic quest, they also quest for psychological and emotional stability (mental health). Many times, the process is geared simply to maturing or to overcoming some personality fault that keeps the character from growing in a psychologically healthy way. For example, Galilinger ("A Rose for Ecclesiastes") and Render (*The Dream Master*) are conceted; Carlton Davis ("The Doors of His Face, The Lamps of His Mouth") has been scared out of his wits.

Sometimes Zelazny's characters must overcome a strong compulsion for revenge, sometimes a desire for power. Some must experience a painful maturation in order to be able to handle their extraordinary abilities. In other words, his characters, like those in classic Greek literature,

are often flawed. Most of them, such as Gallinger and Render, suffer from the sin of pride (or *bubris*). They are often isolated or alienated. For example, Corwin in the *Amber* novels suffers from amnesia at the beginning of the series, and his initial quest is to discover his identity. Sometimes the psychological quest is generated by the character's differences from his peers. (Often this difference is so great that the attempt to overcome it generates a new set of psychological problems.) Gallinger is the most gifted linguist in the world; Davits the best hunter; Render a pioneering psychotherapist who can enter people's fantasies and reshape their personalities; Francis Sandow of *Isle of the Dead* is a virtually immortal world-shaper; Sam of *Lord of Light* is the ultimate reformer.

Often too, Zelazny links his characters to mythic figures or to historical figures who have taken on mythic trappings. These figures represent universal qualities of personality, often called archetypes by psychologists. So, by the linking of his own characters to them, Zelazny broadens the significance of his characters and makes them more identifiable to us and more meaningful. Most important, he connects them to that well of human qualities we all share.

Zelazny uses different techniques to accomplish the linking. In "The Doors of His Face, The Lamps of His Mouth," Carlton Davits is patterned after the biblical Job. Both suffer from pride, though neither is ignorant. Both hold high estate in their cultures, but then fall from their high positions; they are tested, are left physically and mentally scarred, but eventually mature.

In *This Immortal*, the protagonist Conrad is linked to several mythic and historic identities, including Hephaestus, Lord Hades, Cronos, and Papa Legba. Collectively these figures have the characteristics that Zelazny wishes will become associated with Conrad: caretaker of the underworld, fertility figure, and instrument of change. Linking these identities with Conrad at various times through the novel makes the reader eventually come to identify their primary characteristics with him.

In *The Dream Master* Zelazny attaches two opposed clusters of images to characters with conflicting points of view. Render, the therapist, is linked to *ragnarok*, a Scandinavian myth about the end of the world. Eileen Shallot, his blind but mentally powerful patient, is linked to Arthurian lore, and is appropriately romantic and idealistic. Because his pride blocks his insight, Render is swallowed up in Eileen's psychosis at the end of the story.

Sam in *Lord of Light* is linked to the historical Buddha, and to Kalki and Maitreya (the Hindu and Buddhist names for the buddha-who-is-yet-to-come). These buddhas will appear at the end of the current age and save humankind with their love. Not accidentally, Maitreya is also known as the "Lord of Light." Zelazny parallels the events of Sam's life with that of the historical Buddha, and both reform their very stagnant cultures.

Linking serves to make Zelazny's protagonists take on the characteristics of their mythic referents. They seem distant, supranormal, and mysterious. They seem to have some ultimate knowledge. And yet, they ring true to us because we recognize in them many of the psychological qualities we possess. They deal, in the context of science fiction, with the same psychological problems we all face. Their quests for wholeness are our quests.

Zelazny never really turned away from myth; he simply deemphasized it to try other forms and techniques. The *Amber* novels, while they broadly dramatize his own "form and chaos" philosophy, still contain mythic elements. The unicorn, and the images that cluster around it, represent good, and the character Brand represents evil. *Eye of Cat* is heavily immersed in Navajo myth, and the *Changeling* novels use the archetypal "Myth of the Twins" to structure the relationship between the protagonist, Pol, and the antagonist. (Pol is also linked to Orpheus.) Zelazny's characterization works best when it achieves a mythic quality, and this achievement is what occurs in Kalifriki, the protagonist of "Come Back to the Killing Ground, Alice, My Love."

The first story featuring this char-

acter, "Kalifriki of the Thread," was published in a British collection edited by Diana Wynne Jones entitled *Hidden Turnings*. Zelazny told me a few months ago that Kalifriki was just too good a character not to do something else with—and indeed he is. Though it does not appear as yet that he is linked specifically to a mythic character, Kalifriki does possess qualities of the best mythic characters. He is mysterious, he possesses supranormal abilities, he distances us from the present, he seems to have a grip on some sort of ultimate knowledge, and though he stands outside the natural laws that bind the rest of us, we feel secure because he rings psychologically true.

By gathering information from both stories, we learn that Kalifriki has a history shrouded in mystery. He is a monk, a master of Zen (he shoots a bow blindfolded), and he has also studied with Sufi sages. He is an assassin, but he does not take jobs that result in the killing of the innocent and he only takes jobs that pose a challenge for him. He is a shifter, meaning that he can flow among alternate worlds (it is not clear whether he can also shapeshift once he is in the alternate world). We do learn that he does not shift in the same way that the *Kife*, his antagonist in the first story, does. He is a master of a cosmic string called "the thread," which might also be symbolically that thread from which individual destiny is woven and which is in the custody of the Fates in Greek, the Parcae in Roman, and the Norns in Germanic mythology. Kalifriki also seems to be able to slip time. He lives in Constantinople in "Come to the Killing Ground" (The city has not been called that in our world since 1930), yet he knows of and is involved with space travel and cloning. He is probably immortal.

We are not told how Kalifriki got to be a master of a powerful tool like the thread, where he came from, any of his past history, or even if he is human. "Kalifriki of the Thread" begins with an epigram attributed to Orpheus the Thracian, who is a vegetation and fertility god and who, like other gods of this kind, is torn apart and reborn. There are broad

similarities between Orpheus's adventures and those of Kalifriki. Both characters descend to an underworld to retrieve someone. Orpheus first retrieves but then loses Eurydice, and Kalifriki goes into a singularity (a black hole) with Alice to rescue Nelsor but fails to bring him back. Descent into the black hole is symbolically a descent into the underworld. Kalifriki also apparently uses the cosmic string with the same extraordinary skill that Orpheus plays music. And both have the capacity to change things.

Kalifriki does not seem to have other Orphic qualities. One of the traditional stories about Orpheus is that he became mad and wandered aimlessly for years after he lost Eurydice. This loss occurs because of his own weakness; he could not stop himself from turning to look at her before they cleared the underworld. As a vegetation god, Orpheus's return from the underworld guarantees the return of fertility in the spring; Kalifriki's return from the singularity also marks, at least symbolically, a return or renewal. He comes back with three of the Alices. Are they to be interpreted as the Fates, the Parcae, or the Norns? Perhaps.

The epigram that introduces "Kalifriki of the Thread" also cites the apples of the Hesperides, most famous for being stolen by Hercules as his last labor. Because he was manipulated by Hera, his lifelong enemy, Hercules went mad. He then exiled himself as punishment and eventually engaged in the twelve labors as part of his penance. It seems unlikely at this point, though, that Zelazny is linking Kalifriki to Hercules or that the madness of both Hercules and Orpheus is more than coincidence.

What should we expect Zelazny to do with Kalifriki if he writes another story with the Master of the Thread as the central character? Perhaps he will construct a plot where the assassin will go mad and wander some world, physically or symbolically, or maybe he will be torn apart by frenzied maidens and then restored.

We don't know, of course. But, after all, contemplating what Zelazny might do is a large part of what excites us about his work. ♦

About the Authors

Roger Zelazny has been either the creator of or the inspiration for most of the words up to this point in the magazine, so we won't go on at too much length here. Suffice it to say that "Come Back to the Killing Ground, Alice, My Love" is his tenth piece of fiction for AMAZING Stories, and his first appearance as an author in these pages since "Madwand" in the September 1981 issue. He is a nine-time Hugo and Nebula Award winner, and one of those prizewinners, *He Who Shapes*, was serialized in this magazine in 1965.

Carl B. Yoke, a lifelong enthusiast of science fiction and fantasy and, not incidentally, a friend of the aforementioned author for around four decades, was a logical and highly appropriate person to chronicle Roger's career in his essay, "With a Splash of Brilliant Images," which concludes on this page. Carl, a professor of English at Kent State University, is the author of several academic and critical articles and books on SF and fantasy writers, including but not limited to you-know-who.

We scheduled the latest story from **Alexander Jablkov** to appear in this issue before we realized that—coincidentally enough—he, too, is one of those authors who debuted in this magazine. "Happy Are the Gods of Babylon," in the March 1986 issue, got his career started. "The Logic of Location," in this issue, and *Carve the Sky*, a novel recently out in paperback, are keeping it going in high style.

Long-time readers of this magazine are familiar with the work of **Robert Frazier** as a poet as well as a prose stylist. "Furious Weathers" is Bob's ninth story for us in the last five and a half years—beginning with his first fiction sale, "Dreamtigers," in the March 1987 issue.

Interrupting what was starting to look like a requirement for membership, **Martha Soukup** is a writer whose first sale was *not* made to this

magazine. (In fact, her debut story was "Dress Rehearsal" in *Universe* (1986), the second-to-last *Universe* anthology assembled by Terry Carr.) "Last Wish" is her fourth contribution to this magazine, and her first story in the full-sized format. "Over the Long Haul" (March 1990) was a Nebula and Hugo nominee, and so was/is "Dog's Life" (March 1991)—it was on the Nebula ballot this year, and it is on the Hugo ballot for the 1992 award for Best Short Story, which will be given out at the World Science Fiction Convention in Orlando, Florida, early this month. Our fingers are crossed for you, Martha; maybe the fourth time will be the charm.

Jak Koke and **Jonathan Bond** do most of their writing as collaborators, and "Deadwise" is their first published appearance as a duo. Jonathan has one previous appearance in print as a solo author, in *Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine*; Jak has sold other stories (many of them in collaboration), but this story is his debut in print.

For the third installment of "About the Authors" dealing with the serialized novel by **Anne McCaffrey** and **Mercedes Lackey**, we've decided to have Anne take the stage. *The Ship Who Searched* is the 30th SF novel (give or take a couple) that has appeared with her name on it in the last 25 years, with almost a third of that output coming since the end of 1989. Clearly, Ms. McCaffrey shows no signs of slowing down, as further evidenced by the fact that one of her latest books, *All the Weyrs of Pern*, is on the 1992 Hugo ballot for Best Novel.

She said recently that "Of all the stories I have written to date, 'The Ship Who Sang' is my favorite." That piece, one of the classic short stories in the field, has served as the foundation for other work on the "brainship" theme . . . the latest of which is *The Ship Who Searched*.

Next time it's your turn, Misty. ♦

The Logic of Location

Alexander Jablakov

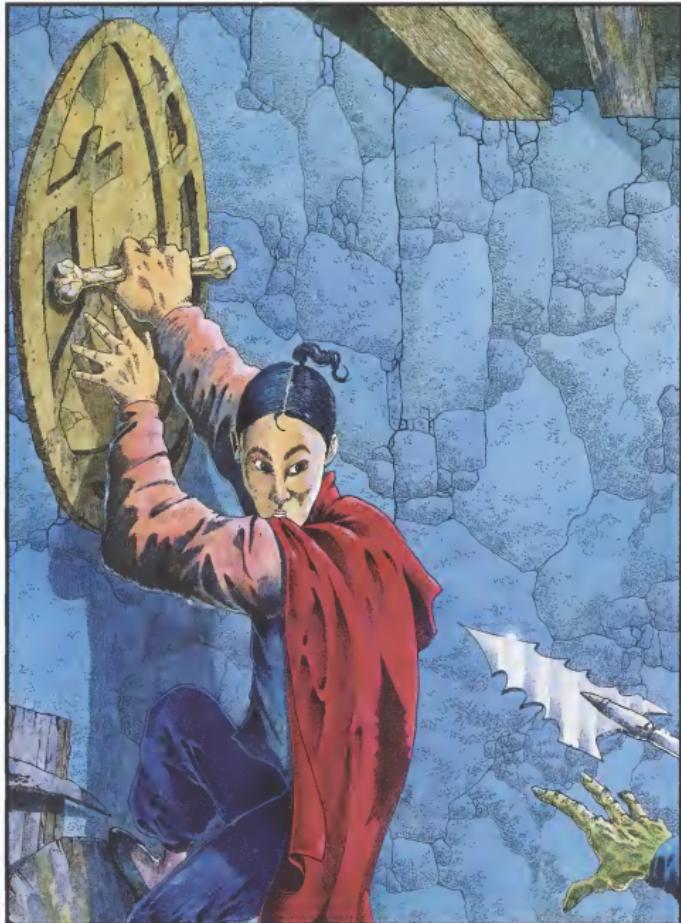


illustration by Bob Hobbs

After an hour of grunting labor, the two servants, with Skarnath Ferre's silently offered assistance, had managed to tear the plant growth from the boundary marker. Corpulent men, house workers unused to lifting anything heavier than a teacup, they collapsed at the base of the stone stele like fallen heroes, gasping for breath, their powdered faces streaked with sweat.

Ferre shrugged back into his silk vest and wiped his hands. His curling hair was parted severely in the middle and tied back in the pigtail characteristic of a northerner. He checked his nails. Clean and unbroken, thank the Word. He hadn't cared to ruin his pigskin gloves. He gestured, and a small boy wearing an

oversized antique breastplate from some long-ago war crept up and presented them on a half-circle silver tray. The boy's tiny, shaved head was almost lost in the breastplate's neck opening. Ferre tugged the gloves on, reveling in the feel of the soft skin.

"What say you, Lord Magician?" asked Lucius Pike, Duke of Riskeltarn. The duke's long narrow body, seemingly devoid of hips or shoulders, rested precariously on his military folding stool, ready to roll off at any moment. A viciously multi-toothed pike rested across his knees.

"I shall be able to tell you in a moment, my lord," Ferre said, turning away. The way the duke opened and closed his wide mouth bothered the magician.

He pulled a carved soapstone vial out of his bag and poured powdered cinnabar onto the stele. He swirled the powder with a fine camel's-hair brush, sending tiny droplets of mercury glinting in the sunlight. Then, in the blunt Lion's Bone calligraphy he favored for simple spells of exposure, he wrote the ideogram for *Reveal*, followed by three glyphs from the High Mountain Sylabary for *Word Marks*. The ideogram for *Writing*, with its intense self-referential power, was used by magicians only in the most extreme circumstances, and even then usually led to disaster.

In response to the spell, the cinnabar flowed over the boundary marker and settled in the cracks and depressions that made up the incantatory ideograms, filling them with brilliant red.

"Well?" Pike demanded. "How can we move it? I'm a military man, Ferre. I can't waste my time watching you doodle." He slapped the pike, symbol of his authority, for emphasis.

Ferre stared at the newly revealed ideograms. *Here Lies The Boundary*, they said. *Let Not The Two Elements Fuse*, followed by the traditional invocation to the God of Boundaries. Below, an elaborate cartouche contained the personal symbol of One Horned Serpent. Ferre, who had not yet earned his own personal ideogram, stuck his lower lip out in dismay. He should have known maters would not turn out to be simple.

In Ferre's underclass days, not so long ago, One Horned Serpent had appeared at the Hall of Blooming Yew as Lecturer on Death. Serpent was a heavy, solid man with the golden skin of an alchemical adept, a theoretical specialist in the helix left by a departing life. His colleagues in the Open Way considered him erratic, even dangerous. Aside from indulging in childish feats of strength, like a performer at a village fair, he was a gambler, an odd vice among magicians, who wished to settle the universe into readily reproducible phenomena so that they could make their living from them. Chaos was a magician's greatest enemy, because in the face of Chaos all men were equal.

One Horned Serpent had once lost a foolish bet, on how much water he could drink from a roof spout during a downpour, to the Celestial Sub-Administrator of Rains and Storms. In consequence, he had been imprisoned in a porcelain jar for five years until, by using the plum blossom petals that floated in every spring, he had drawn the ideogram for *Escape*. Regardless of his eccentricities, Serpent had not been a magician to be trifled with.

To distract himself from his sudden nervousness, Ferre looked off into the dense undergrowth on the other side of the boundary markers. "What lies that way, Lord?"

"Eh?" Pike seemed irritated by the question. "Urne Fischer's land. See what he does with it?" His gesture took in both Fischer's unkempt scrub and his own carefully manicured lawn. It also knocked the pike from his lap. He grabbed for it and cursed. "I want that land. That's why you're here. Well?"

"One Horned Serpent was a powerful magician," Ferre said cautiously. "This is an unusually powerful boundary spell. But . . ." He was tempted to simply say to Chaos with it and move on, heading toward the Jade Mountains to the west, his original goal. But negating the spell of a magician of One Horned Serpent's stature could establish the reputation of an apprentice on his Long Year. He had turned from his path and offered his services at Riskeltarn to add, in some small way, to that reputation. Now that the addition could be immeasurably larger, he could not turn his back on it, particularly since leaving would cause a corresponding diminution in his reputation. Most apprentices spent their Long Year dispersing irritating ghosts and finding ways to keep wine from spoiling. "I can move it." His voice boomed with a confidence he did not feel.

Pike's eyes glowed and he tugged at his long whiskers, shaved so that they covered only his upper cheeks. "That would show Fischer, wouldn't it? Let's squeeze his property into a space a foot across and let him walk along it sideways like a crab."

At a gesture, servants picked up Pike's folding stool. They were all armored in chain mail, which heated up mercilessly in the sun. They sweated up the hill, the chain mail strangely soundless, as if actually much farther away than it appeared. Skarnth Ferre walked sedately behind, his silk roll of instruments carried by a hulking, resentful servant whose lower lip was pierced by a dozen golden loops, some local form of ceremonial or decorative jewelry. Whatever had happened to One Horned Serpent? Had he lost another wager to some irritable deity? More than likely. Why had the Duke of Riskeltarn commanded Serpent to put up the boundary line if he wished to move it so soon after?

Despite its wide, oppressively manicured lawns, the Palace of Riskeltarn had a makeshift look, as if a passing demon had dropped parts of several palaces out of the waistband of his gown by accident, scattering them here, over the top of this bulbous hill.

The sky pushed down low overhead, wet and murky. Ferre had been brought up among the wide forests and open fields of the North, and was not used to the clouds that crept through the valleys beneath the Jade Mountains. Still, it seemed more oppressive than necessary. Perhaps Pike enjoyed it. The man's skin was pale and unhealthy, and looked as if it would dry out and crack in a moment's sunlight.

Ferre changed his clothes before lunch and stepped out

onto a terrace to gaze down at the line of steles curving around the base of the hill. They were visible expressions of the symbolic world of Truth. Many of the steles had sunk into wet, dense growth and vanished from view. Ferre could see the fugitive gleams of a mountain stream as it rushed down the rocks from the cliffs above. It flashed through a narrow valley, opening out gradually, but came upon Riskeletarn and drew back, like a snake meeting a frog too large to swallow. Despairing of ever overcoming this unfair obstacle, the stream turned aside and, having lost all ambition, sank into listlessness and spread out into the swamp that made up most of Urne Fischer's land.

"Your lunch, sir." The hulking servant with the jeweled lower lip stood next to him with a lacquer bowl, having entered as silently as everyone seemed to at Riskeletarn.

"Do you remember a magician here?" Ferre asked as he sat down at the table. "A large golden man, very strong. He may have tried to bet with you."

The servant whipped the top off the soup bowl with weary panache. "Some such may have floated through." His voice sounded strangled, as if he were speaking only while inhaling, never having learned to do it properly. Mountain peasants tended to have deficient educations. "They tangle with our lives and move on." He groaned. "It has settled in my memory. I do not know."

"And Urne Fischer? Your unfortunate neighbor. What can you tell me about him?"

The servant opened his mouth wide and bared his teeth. "Fischer? We will deal with him. We will be revenged!" He stopped and breathed heavily, as if abashed at his vehemence. "You will do well. You will punish him." The servant backed slowly away, moving his hands to brush air at Ferre. This was a common local gesture upon departing. Ever formal, Ferre brushed air back at him. Startled, the servant disappeared.

The soup had grown cold during its long journey up from the kitchen, which lay somewhere in the deep, low corridors of Riskeletarn Palace. Ferre was housed in a high pavilion, far from everything else, and had not had a warm meal yet. He stared down at the congealed mass of noodles and seaweed, and sighed. He had expected his Long Year to be difficult, but had not known it would be so lonely. He poked glumly at the noodles, then had an idea.

Ferre looked around himself to make sure he was unobserved. Pike's servants tended to float through without warning, stepping silently across the thick, blue-green rugs, with implausible errands as their excuse. It would not do to be observed in magical parlor tricks. The dignity of the profession must be maintained.

He pulled off his gloves, reached into the soup and pulled out a couple of the thickest noodles. After a few moments of drying, they became sticky and more easily handled. Ferre knotted them with his delicate, long fingers, until they formed a version of the ideogram *Cold*, and dropped them back in the soup. At this point the ideogram had no power, being merely descriptive. A more potent version might have formed ice on the bowl.

He pushed down with his spoon and, moving with

tense precision, cut out the one stroke that separated the ideogram *Cold* from the ideogram *Hot*. Within a minute, the soup had begun to steam. When it began to boil, he brushed away the ideogram until it was once again random noodles, and began to eat, feeling a minor self-satisfaction that warmed him almost as much as the soup did.

The Pavilion of the Blue Willow, where Ferre had learned the essentials of Names, had been covered with enameled tiles, tiles which seemed to move and shift even as you looked at them, their fine lines of cobalt and indigo swaying like willow branches in a high wind. One of the two tiles immediately above the entrance door displayed the ideogram *Death*, and the other *Life*. They differed by only one stroke. Within the Pavilion were *Growth* and *Decay*, again differing by one stroke. And so for *Contain* and *Lose*; *Submit* and *Revolt*; *Dry* and *Wet*. They flickered and shimmered, each turning into the other. It was an old joke of the Gods, a trap. For a magician a good writing hand was more than a social accomplishment, it was an essential of the profession, for in Naming Magic slight errors of calligraphy could lead to horrendous consequences.

Lunch over, Ferre left the safety of his pavilion to explore the hill of Riskeletarn. He was curious about what defined this place. After several hours, he decided that it was insipidity, damp, and squalor. The plants in the gardens were so lazy that they drooped over the ground, not trying to stand up. Plaster cracked from the walls. It seemed impossible that a hilltop could be this soggy.

A tiny building with a steeply pitched roof and a single round window stood in a filthy inner courtyard, surrounded by dung heaps, broken wagon wheels piled against it. Under its accretions of mud, wasp nests, and bird droppings, Ferre recognized a shrine of the ancient Jacinth Dynasty. It was a shrine to the Spirit of the Place, the tutelary spirit that made Riskeletarn precisely what it was and not anything else.

The Jacinth Emperors had been fascinated by the potentialities of definition and had built these shrines throughout the Middle Empire, often in odd locations: inside caves, beneath the surfaces of rivers, under the lips of volcanoes. By defining and labeling already existing things, they believed that they would thus be forever in control of the Empire, as immovable as a ship with a thousand anchors. The Revolt of the Green Turbans, the founders of the succeeding Celadon Dynasty, had demonstrated that even an immovable ship can sink.

A huge ideogram dominated the dark interior, defining *Hill*, embellished with the curlicues and loops that made the Hill Riskeletarn. Ferre gazed at the ideogram and was suddenly desperately ill, as if he had mistakenly taken a mouthful of some long-dead animal, warmed and rotting in the sun. He ran out into the courtyard and vomited, just managing to keep the hem of his silk robe clear.

He looked back at the shrine and fought back a resurgence of nausea. As a student, he had been told that sometimes a magician needs to feel the power with his gut instead of his mind, but he wasn't sure this was

what they had meant. . . . Something moved behind him. Ferre turned.

Lucius Pike, Duke of Riskeltarn, stood in the entrance gate, his servants behind him in battle array. They gleamed silver in the darkness of the courtyard. Battle axes, swords, halberds, and combat standards swayed over them. They all stared wide-eyed at Ferre. He never managed to catch one of them blinking, making him feel like the loser in some children's game.

"Are you all right, Lord Magician?" Pike's voice was ominous. Calling a lowly Long Year apprentice "Lord Magician" was contemptuous, Ferre realized. People hired apprentices for magical tasks because they worked for reputation only, a low price and one paid for by someone else, but it was sometimes for their very inexperience that they were valued, since they were willing to do things no sensible magician would attempt.

"Most excellent, my lord," Ferre said breezily. "I was on my way to the front gate to further examine the steles and became lost. You have a large and complex palace." He smiled, as if not faced with several dozen heavily armed servants. "What is this building?" He pointed at the shrine. "I know little of farming. A birthing house for stock, perhaps? I'm curious."

Pike examined him, then looked at the building. "Yes, yes. That's exactly what it is. We'll be tearing it down soon. And the front gate"—he pointed with his weapon, letting its countless sharp points nearly graze Ferre's nose—"is this way."

"Many thanks, my lord." Ferre strolled casually out of the gate, stomach churning in anticipation of a blow to his back, and was sick again in the bushes outside.

The air beyond the steles hung heavy and wet, like a damp cloth wrapped around Ferre's head. He struggled across the swamp, jumping from tussock to tussock, trying unsuccessfully to keep his trousers from getting muddy. A day at Riskeltarn had left his skin with a slick dampness which he could not get rid of.

He eventually found what looked like the low eaves of a house in the undergrowth. It looked as if it had been abandoned for years. Trees had grown through the roof of the building, overshadowing it. Around the house, covered with moss and ferns, stood huts built of overlapping planks. Everything was redolent of decline and decay.

"What would you have?" a man's voice asked. Sitting in a door cut into a hut was an old, white-bearded man, whittling a stick with a scaling knife. Ferre could see into the hut behind him and was startled to find that it was made out of an overturned boat. Pots and pans hung from what had once been thwarts.

"I'm just looking around," Ferre said, adjusting his sleeves.

"Not much to see, eh?" the man said. He stood up and offered his hand. "Or rather, too much to look at. Urne Fischer, at your service."

"Skarnath Ferre." Fischer's hand was dry and tough, quite unlike the damp softness of Pike's. His teeth gleamed with the even whiteness of dentures.

"I'm traveling on my Long Year," Ferre said, trying to explain his presence in this mountain swamp. He sat down next to Fischer. They sat for a moment in silence.

"A magician, eh? Don't usually come through around here." Fischer squinted up through the trees at the late afternoon light and looked thoughtful. Ferre was relieved to see that the light here, unlike that on Riskeltarn Hill, was bright and warm. "Last one I remember was an odd yellow man. Could that be right? My memory isn't what it was, or rather, what I remember it as being." He chortled at his own decrepitude.

"One Horned Serpent."

Fischer frowned. "That's the one! Seems that he was working for me, then. Can't remember. Much too long ago. Another time. Another place, almost, it seems like."

"Can't you recall anything about him?" Ferre asked. "It's important. Where did he go? What happened to him?"

"There was an encroachment on my land." Fischer gazed with some perplexity at Riskeltarn Hill, which loomed over them. "From there, I suppose . . . I don't remember. I paid him his fee. The knowledge that was his fee. And he bungled it." Fischer was energized by the vague memories, and slapped his knee for emphasis. "He bungled it, by the waters, then tried to make up for it with these." He tapped his dentures. "He thought me an easy fool." He settled back in his seat. "I daresay he was right, in his way."

"Pike wants your land." Ferre was startled at his own words. He should just do the job and move on. Fischer's fate was none of his concern. "He intends to move across and take it."

"My land? Let him have it." Tears suddenly appeared on Fischer's long eyelashes. "It's worthless to me now. Land is no good unless it's next to . . . next to . . ." He grew silent, staring off into space. The sky grew darker overhead.

Ferre examined him with dismay. What was he to make of this? Perhaps he could move One Horned Serpent's steles a few feet. That would prove his power without annihilating this poor old man. Pike would be furious, of course, but somehow Ferre could not regard that as a drawback.

Fischer's mouth fell open, his artificial teeth shining in the twilight darkness. "Help me, Ferre," he moaned. "Help me." His voice had changed, grown deeper.

Ferre stared at him. The old man's bearded face was as expressionless as before. One of his teeth seemed to glow brighter than the rest, as if he had bitten down on a star. "Help me, Ferre! Or you'll be damned along with me. I guarantee it." Fischer's mouth glowed, and he whimpered.

Ferre recognized the voice from a long-ago lecture hall. "Where are you, Serpent?"

"I'm dead, you idiot! That Pike . . . the tooth, man, the tooth! You know what to do."

Ferre reached into the old man's mouth and delicately pulled out one of his molars. It came out slowly, as if it were long and stuck in mud. When he had finished, the other slumped back as if relieved of a burden.

Resting in Ferre's hand was a human tooth, engraved with One Horned Serpent's personal ideogram. It glowed and burned. He clenched his fist around it.

Fischer stood up, shaking himself. "That's done with, at least," he said, his voice his own once again. "Piece of advice for you, young magician: stick to your job. No extracurricular business. Magicians seem easily horn-swoggled. And stay away from betting. It's a poor way to lose your life." He wiggled his jaw with his hand. "I'll have to eat carefully from now on, looks like. You can handle it from here. Good luck. I'm sure I'll know how it works out." He vanished into his hut, whistling.

Skarnath Ferre awoke at the darkest point of night. He lay for a moment in his cot, feeling the sliding of silk against his skin. Riskeltarn Palace was utterly silent, without even the creaking of wood partitions and stealthy step of servants looting food from the kitchens that Ferre had experienced in other palaces.

He had promised Pike that the steles would be moved in the morning, taking over Urne Fischer's land and leaving him no legal recourse. The steles defined a line of division, and could not be argued with.

That meant that Ferre had to act tonight. He rolled from his cot, gathered up his magical equipment, and stole out into the hallway.

He'd chosen the tiny shrine to the Spirit of the Place for the conjuration. The casting of spells with death required a place of disquiet for their operation, such as the Petitioners' Chamber of a Provincial Censor-in-Chief, the bloody stand of an outdoor barber-surgeon, the Interview Room of a Municipal Torturer: wherever spirits were uneasy. The Jacinth Dynasty shrine seemed to concentrate the unease of all Riskeltarn. He piled old wagons on wheels against the door and knelt on the filthy floor.

The dead tend to be irritable when woken, and the dread paradox was that the more successful the conjuration, the more irritable they were. Yanking a magician like One Horned Serpent from his enjoyment of the Lotus Fields could end up putting Ferre before a punitive tribunal somewhere in the Celestial Hierarchy. If the annoyed ghost lodged a complaint with the Spiritual Intendant of Death and Forgetfulness, who was not known for Her forbearance or patience, Ferre could find himself condemned to reincarnation as a castrated water buffalo, assigned to haunt a place of public relief and rattle piss pots, or have his soul sent to the Ninth Plane of the Ninth Sphere of Penultimate Existence, there to dangle for the Nine Eternities remaining to the current cycle, sport for those odd demons that lived beyond the revolutions of the planets. Skarnath Ferre found himself planning escape routes off Riskeltarn. He could be back on the road toward the Jade Mountains in less than half an hour.

But running away would never earn him his personal ideogram. He unrolled the silk tapestry that contained his instruments. He kept his eyes averted from the sickening ideogram, *Hill*, though he already had some idea of what its foulness resulted from. After a moment's thought, he incised the ideogram *Disquiet* in the dirt floor of the shrine, using the angular Grasshopper Leg

calligraphy. One Horned Serpent's tooth fit into the center knot of the ideogram. Ferre stoked a small, hot fire and melted a blend of bismuth, lead, and tin, with an admixture of crystallized silver, which he then poured into the incised ideogram, sealing the tooth in a matrix of cooling metal. When it had hardened, he pulled the ideogram out of its mold. The word gleamed with disquiet, vibrating in the darkness of the shrine. It was the first rumble of an earthquake, the sight of bloody stools, the taste of just swallowed poison at the back of the throat, the smell of a burning house, the feel of a creaking bridge over a mountain chasm. Its edges suddenly looked like razors.

Ferre tapped one of the ideogram's strokes with a wand. "One Horned Serpent," he called. "Awake and speak." He rubbed his wand teasingly across the stroke. If he removed it, the ideogram would become *Calm*, and One Horned Serpent could go back to sleep.

A whirlwind blew through the shrine. "Are you a fool?" Serpent roared. "I call on you to free me, and you coerce me instead? Would you try to force a starving man to eat at sword's point?"

One Horned Serpent appeared as the dead often do, a chaotic mass of features, like ill-tended ancestor portraits piled in the corner of a hovel. Eyes, nose, fingers, navel, shoulder blades: all rotated separately, as if the lead blocks that had printed the book of his life had been broken up and sent back to the printer, there to be reused for other volumes, cookbooks, perhaps, or illustrated treatises on animal husbandry.

"I try not to reason with the dead," Ferre said, suppressing fear. "Their conclusions tend to be . . . final." He had conjured One Horned Serpent in this manner to retain some control over him. Ferre hoped the bounds had been set carefully enough.

Serpent thundered with rage, blowing Ferre's elegant evening clothes with a dry simoom, or perhaps a harmattan. It might even have been a khamsin; it had been a long time since Ferre had studied meteorological conjuring. But he knew that Serpent's conflict with the Celestial Sub-Administrator of Rains and Storms had started with a jurisdictional dispute over the weather.

Ferre could see One Horned Serpent's bones blowing in the wind like straws. He counted them while Serpent raged. One tooth missing, of course. And one femur. Odd. Serpent had always had two legs. Things were starting to fall together.

"One Horned Serpent," Ferre said, tapping *Disquiet*. "It's getting late. Are you in need of assistance? Or should I let you get back to sleep? Then I can get back in my bed too."

"No!" Serpent yelped. "You have to save me."

"You lost a bet, didn't you?" Ferre said. "To Lucius Pike. Fair and square. Am I wrong?"

"No, damn you, you're not wrong. These damn busy-body apprentices—"

"Sleep peacefully then, One Horned Serpent, and I'll be on my way," Ferre said, shaving off a fragment of the stroke that separated *Disquiet* from *Calm*. "You certainly don't need two legs to dance in the Hall of the Dead."

"No, I'm sorry, no! Don't do it, Ferre!"

"Tell me what happened. Tell me how Pike convinced you to change a Celestial designation," Ferre looked up at the huge ideogram *Riskeltarn Hill*. Nausea almost overcame him again, but he fought it down. Remove the middle stroke of *Hill*, and you got *Lake*. Riskel Tarn. It made perfect sense.

"I lost a damn bet," Serpent wailed. "To a fish! A wordless fish."

Ferre thought about Pike, opening and closing his mouth. His odd whiskers, the servant with the metal loops through his lips, the silent, drifting, armored population of Riskeltarn Palace. "What did you bet on? How long each of you could hold his head under water?"

"This isn't a joking matter, Ferre. He took my power and changed the ideogram. He changed the Map, Ferre!"

"By using you," Ferre said in wonder. "The only way. He used part of a magician's own body to fill in the missing bar. Ingenious. Much smarter than a fish usually is, in my experience."

"Save your ill-placed admiration for later and help me!"

"Tell me the story, and I will."

"Fischer hired me, that damn gabby oldster next door. The water bothered him, the water of the lake. It kept seeping onto his land. Flooding, all the time. He wanted me to block it off, remind it of its proper place, its proper limits. I was to set up a line of stelae to set the line of division."

"What did you charge?" Ferre sat back on his haunches. This was what he wanted, an honest account of a powerful magician's business dealings. It was the sort of thing they had not taught him at school.

"Knowledge, Ferre. What other price is worth charging? It's the damn back-door conjurors who charge food and gold. Those are easily enough obtained elsewhere. I got Fischer to teach me how he communicated with the water creatures in the lake. He could talk to them, a family skill. He used it to make his living. That was what had him so annoyed, really. He talked to them about the lake swelling up and they claimed they had nothing to do with it. Nothing at all, they said. A natural process. Fischer didn't believe them, so they were having a tiff. It took a lot of persuading, but he finally taught me. So, before I set up the boundary stones, I went down to the water and talked to the biggest fish in the lake, a huge pike, must be a hundred years old, more, those things live forever and never stop growing—"

"You wanted to make a bet with it," Ferre was astounded. To learn the language of the fish in order to make a wager—it was an act of magnificent tiny-mindedness.

"Well, of course." One Horned Serpent seemed surprised. "What other pleasures does life have to offer? He and his servants swirled the water around my boat. Pike claimed that they had lifted boats out of the water with their snouts. They'd even tossed Fischer out, without even noticing the weight. He was boastful. I laughed. Ridiculous, I said. Fish can't do that. So they bet me—find the heaviest thing you can find, and throw it in. We'll lift it back out again. And we bet ourselves against

it, our own flesh. Fish have nothing else to offer. Useless things, really. They didn't know me. I ripped a tree into by the roots. A huge tree, Ferre, an oak, it must have weighed—"

"Never mind the muscle-flexing," Ferre said impatiently. "What happened?"

"I threw the tree, roots and all, into the lake, and went to bed, laughing. Those damn minnows wouldn't be able to do a thing. It was too damn heavy. And they couldn't! I could see them bumping their useless snouts against it. They had to cheat, the damn gape-mouths. They had to get help!"

"From whom?"

"That old bastard, the Celestial Sub-Administrator of Rains and Storms! They were operating under some arrangement . . . one of Heaven's damn power rearrangements, I can never figure them out. Plus he's had it in for me . . . well, you know. I went to bed, knowing that the next morning I would fry up a nice pan of pike for breakfast. During the night it rained, harder than I'd ever heard it. Floods, torrents. By morning, the lake had flooded, and the tree had floated back up to where I had torn it out. I saw it resting there, by morning light, and knew I was doomed. The bastards! Fischer was furious. Wasn't that what he had hired me to deal with, the damn water covering his land? He was patron-insolent. Right, right you are sir, I said. Here's a little something to make up for it. His teeth were bad, so I made him a set of dentures. Then I grabbed a pliers and ripped out one of my own to set in it. It was my only chance, to wait for someone like you to come along. I set up the boundary stones and waded into the water. I'm a man of my world, Ferre. Every magician has to be. Remember that."

"And they took your leg off." Ferre was still feeling the sympathetic pain of a tooth ripped from his jaw. Was that the strength necessary to become a true magician? Was he really up to it?

"Have you ever seen the teeth on a pike? Hundreds and hundreds of them, in the jaw, on the lips, even covering the tongue. He ripped that leg right off at the hip. I don't think it even slowed him down. Then the rest of them pulled me down under the water, all of them piling up on me, their mouths all over my skin. . . ."

That was why the ideogram made Ferre sick. The only way the fish had had enough power to change it was by taking the life of a magician. It was the energy of death that vibrated in that ideogram.

"And why should I help you?" Ferre said. It was a vicious decision, to potentially leave a fellow magician behind in post-mortem bondage, but it would have violated the ethics of the profession to release him without cost, for magic without cost led to Chaos.

"Because if you don't, they'll put you in here with me! They'll use *your* miserable death to move those damn stelae."

The door suddenly rattled behind Ferre and knocked over a wagon wheel. After a moment's hesitation, a greater force began to pound on it. While One Horned Serpent had been spinning his tale, the palace had noticed

Ferre's absence and become aroused. Ferre had thought he was winning something from Serpent, but really it had turned out the other way around: Serpent's narrative delay had resulted in a compulsion, a compulsion Ferre could not ignore.

"You were always well known for your charm, Serpent." Ferre reached into his gear and put on a ring. He held it, casually, over the brazier, ignoring the searing of his finger.

Out in the courtyard Ferre heard loud voices, the clatter of armaments. "Ferre!" Pike shouted. "Don't listen to that madman. He's dead, anyway."

"He has a point," Ferre said.

"Word save us from laymen," One Horned Serpent muttered. "Ferre. You know what you have to do. It's your life now too."

Ferre sighed. "True enough." He reversed the ring on his finger, wincing with its hot agony. Magicians, he reminded himself, were magicians because they were willing to pay the cost. The pain made him want to scream. His seared flesh stank.

He climbed up the pedestal, tearing his sleeve, to his annoyance, and getting himself covered with dust. He took hold of the massive central stroke of the ideogram *Riskeltarn*. He looked over his shoulder. Swords thrust through the doorway. Pike brushed them aside and stormed in. He saw Ferre and smiled insincerely. "Ah, there you are, dear boy, I was just—no!" He swung the teeth of his pike at Ferre's back.

With a desperate effort, Ferre yanked the central stroke out of the ideogram. One Horned Serpent's yellow, waxy femur pulled out of the crumbling clay. Ferre toppled backward, holding it tightly, ring pressed against it. The ideogram above him was now *Riskel Tarn*, a mountain lake. He prepared to slap the ground and roll, but instead of hard earth, he splashed into water. Dirty, stinking water, but water.

"Give me my leg, Ferre!" One Horned Serpent laughed, his voice suddenly confident and full. "And let me be on my way."

"Wait, Serpent," Ferre shouted. "You can't just leave me here."

"It's a useful lesson to an apprentice," One Horned Serpent said with another laugh. "You have to know how to survive the consequences of your own magic. Whatever are they teaching you at the Redwood Grove these days?" The femur was wrenched from Ferre's hands and water closed over his head, as the shrine sank into the water toward its natural and ordained place at the bottom of the mountain lake.

Ferre swam up through the rushing water, pulled down by the weight of his silk roll of magical instruments. His head finally broke the surface and he stroked desperately to shore. Several times his feet were seized from below and he was pulled back under the water, but each time he managed to break free and make it back to air. Enraged fish boiled around his body. He could see them, dimly, in the moonlight, the crayfish, the huge bass with a dozen fisherman's hooks through its lower lip, and the vast, furious, many-toothed pike. Finally, he struggled to shore, pulled himself completely out of the water, and collapsed.

The sun woke him by prying under his eyelids. He stretched, and rammed his head against rock. Turning over, he saw that he was lying at the base of one of the stelae. Beyond the boundary line, where Riskeltarn Hill had loomed, was now a mountain lake. The air was clear and sunny. Mountains reflected in the still water. The mountain stream had regained its energy, and plunged into the lake in a cascade.

Ferre struggled to his feet, examining his clothing. The silk of his robes had been destroyed by the water. They hung on him, wrinkled and pathetic. It wasn't even worth wringing them out.

He was alive, but his clothes were ruined, and that bastard One Horned Serpent had used his assistance and vanished. Of course, Serpent now had, pressed into the bone of his femur by a red-hot signet ring, one half of the ideogram *Completion*, in Flying Crane calligraphy. Skarnath Ferre had retained the other half. When they met again, it should prove useful.

"Good morning, young magician!" a voice called cheerily. It was Urne Fischer, striding toward him through the high grass. "I'm glad you finally corrected this unfortunate situation."

"Oh," said Ferre, shrugging out of his blue vest and drooping it over the stele. The thing was cotton. It might yet be saved. "It was nothing. An overdue cartographic correction."

"Ah, yes. Well, one good thing. Pike's been eating well these past few years. He's big now, and hungry. A fatal combination, for a fish." Fischer came out to the shore. In his hands he carried a fishing rod.

Ferre smiled at him, forgetting his ruined clothes. "A beautiful day, isn't it?"

"That it is," Fischer said. He reached back and with a practiced, graceful motion, cast the hook out into the water. "A perfect day for fishing." ♦

Furious Weathers

Robert Frazier

One foot forward, then the other . . . I am running down to the wharves at Bunker's Cove. Our old house of unpainted clapboards has long since been gutted for a fancy summer home. The bait company shut down, the pilings for the lobster pound have rotted and now rip free with the tides, and up by the highway the Samples family runs a modern Irving station with a quick grocery and a three-washer laundromat on the side. But that's not what I see as my soles slap the black pavement. There's an all-consuming storm of blackness around me—entropy, annihilation, zero time—and somehow I'm running back through the years to my father.

The last time I saw him, the snow clouds advanced in angry gray curtains that dropped over Frenchman Bay and scraped the tops of the pines on Stave Island across the inlet. It was after the Christmas of Ninety-Two, and Dad labored each morning at the sawhorse in the side yard. He'd trail shavings through the back entry and carry an envelope of bitter cold around him that seemed to emanate from his overalls and his black and tan wool coat. He tended the heating stove. I would take the



Illustration by Joanne Lorah

kindling from where he dumped it, the snow that crusted the edges of the wood turning to slush on the kitchen linoleum while I stuffed the short sticks into the cook stove with knotted newspapers and paper trash.

That morning, when I lit it with a waxed butter wrapper, I bent to the dark mouth of the stove box to smell the first resinous smoke off the wood, before it caught in a crackling superheated rush of flame.

Dad coughed behind me, deliberate as he always was when giving advice. "Looks ugly towards Bangor, Nattie. If you're stoppin' at Bean's along the way, I'd leave soon. Could be a white-out by afternoon. Seamless as bone."

I stood up straight, spun around. He was seated by a table painted with about twenty coats of navy blue enamel, bent over a cup of coffee I had brewed with his electric pot. He'd kept his black watch cap on, and his eyes were closed. He let the steam loosen the frozen muscles of his face and billow over the backs of his trembling hands. His skin was thickened everywhere by the sun and salt water, and just as grooved as the granite shoreline outside the kitchen window. He'd never been a native up here, but the furious weathers of the mid-coast had ground him, shaped him like a cobble until he dressed and acted and almost talked like the other lobstermen who lived in the cove. I had taken him more than two decades to forget my mother, her college friends, the books, the intellectual talk of his youth. Now he was doing his best to forget me.

"That's bull. That seamless-as-bone stuff. This is coastal climate, not goddamned Mount Katahdin!"

His blue eyes snapped wide open. "I think you should go," he said.

"Look, I have to leave sometime. Accept it. There's no use in pushing me away just to get it over with."

"I guess I'm used to it." A defensive tone swelled into his voice. "Livin' alone, that is."

"Trouble is, Dad, you never got used to it."

His eyes looked rheumy, and I thought I understood, for just a moment, why he was so short with me when I returned home for holidays and summer visits. His long, attenuated ache of loneliness. The inevitable decay and aging. I could do nothing about them, and had to turn away. I didn't know how sick he was then. With deliberate care, I pawed through the wood stacked by the stove for a few smallish logs.

"Well," he said. "We could go for a hike out on Stave. The tide's right for anchoring the '38 off the Eagle's Nest a couple hours. Is that capacious?"

I tossed my choices back on the wood stack and started to lay bread and sandwich fixings out on the counter beside the refrigerator.

"What's capacious mean?"

"Well, well, My Natalie, the famous astrophysicist, has to ask what a big word means." His eyes twinkled with laughter. He took a long sip from his cup and tucked a graying curl of his blond hair behind one ear.

"Just seeing if you remembered," I said.

"Tell me again about Cornell, then. What's this study you're so fired up to get back to?"

"We're working on entropy modeling."

"You mean chaos theory and other means for monitoring signs of instability in galactic bodies. I read an article comparing a few far-out theories. Seems they favor the meteorological approach. Anti-matter storms of mutual annihilation, collapse that eats the cores from galaxies. Joey Samples, of all people, had a new *Scientific American* in the stack of magazines in his crapper down at the bait house. The one with a DNA fragment diagrammed on the cover that looked like a lobster tail."

"You've got the right background," I said.

I slapped mayonnaise on his stale Pepperidge Farm bread like I was caulking boards on a punky boat hull. This was my real Dad.

He said, "But there's problems, right? Glitches."

"Yes. Our model for pre-quasar conditions can't be trusted. If it is correct, then, it turns out, the present state of the Milky Way is dangerous. Our galaxy fits seven of our eight parameters."

"Hmmm." He coughed, a bark from deep in his chest. "Everything has to go sometime."

I said, "I haven't heard you talk like this for a long time."

He spoke loud at me, sharp and serious as a nail. "Just seein' if you remembered."

I'm rounding the corner by the Milbridge house. Then the Wilkins garage. Then Haffner's cottage. Then the Samples' mailbox set on an anchor chain welded in a twist like a model of a nucleic acid, or of a solar flare. I keep running, my feet gliding out before me. Left then right then left.

That yellowjacket summer of my eighteenth birthday, the sun hammered relentless as a funeral bell against the dry soil. The corn grew stunted, emerald leaves edged with papery brown. Withered blueberries resembled buckshot on the low bushes. Worry crossed people's faces in constant waves, like heat rising from the tarmac. And the insects buzzed about the wharves in funnellike clouds of black and gold.

I sat outside in the shadow of the bait company shed on the middle wharf and took telephone orders for the Samples brothers. They were selling anything they could dredge, and I made enough, along with clerking nights at the L. L. Bean outlet in Ellsworth, to cover the gaps in my tuition.

"I hear it's sunspots," Joey said as he popped open one of the bottles of Orange Crush he kept chilled in the slop from the ice machine. Joey's face was handsome in a rugged way, wide yet bony with high cheekbones and a thin mouth. He wore his brown hair slicked back, and a plain white tee-shirt and chinos. His fingers were stained yellow from nicotine. "It's sunspots at the bottom of this."

"Bottom of what?" I said, feigning ignorance.

"The drought, girl. Gotta be a reason for it. God builds his reasons into the way things is."

"You know what I wish?" I said. I batted away some of the flies and wasps that swarmed around the door to the fish shed, attuned to the acrid smell of meat.

Joey gave me a brooding look; his dark eyes smoldered. "What?"

"I wish he'd forget his reasons for yellowjackets."

Joey's laugh rang out, always pure as a saint's in the rare moments it came.

"Got some real news," Dad said as he stepped around the side of the shed. He wiped engine grease from his hands with a scrap of towel. He'd heard us talking from down in the hold of the *38 Special*. "It just came over the scanner. Seems that last night God forgot someone up at the nuthouse in South Bangor."

I felt as if a fist connected with my bowels. I let the name out with an explosion of breath.

"Rafe Wilkins . . ."

He continued in a monotone. "Pulled an electric wire through the ceiling plaster and hung himself on it."

"Guess that's that." Joey whistled low and looked at me. "Won't be no shadow over you now, girl. Rafe'll never show his face here again."

Joey swished a gulp of Crush around between his teeth and spit over the edge of the wharf into the rockweed drying at low tide. The insects were on it in an instant. My stomach flip-flopped.

He said, "You can punch out early if you want."

I looked to Dad. He was staring at Joey with the wary look of a man who'd just discovered his best friend had fallen in love with his daughter. Which, of course, Joey hadn't.

"I think not," I said. "I'm going to give the Lobstering Coop at Corea another call at four. See if we can deal them the best price for Friday. We might unload another ton. Ton and a half."

Joey said to Dad, "You're a lucky man, Mike McCloskey. If you'd had two more towheads like her, I'd hire 'em all."

Dad shrugged.

Then a light rain began to spackle the wide boards on the dock with stains the size of dimes. A feather of cotton clouds obscured the sun, and more sped behind them. The rain intensified, then fell in buckets. Dad ducked into the shed, but I danced a jig as Joey shook his bottle and sprayed me with sticky soda pop. And it was right then that I knew what I wanted to study more than anything at the university: the way things were. The cosmic structure of the way things were.

My left leg extends in a graceful stretch toward the road ahead. It seems to take longer than it should. I'm caught up in acrobatic stillness. The beat swells at my back. My foot, at last, touches down beside a shattered clam shell. My foot is that of a young girl.

The incident with Rafe Wilkins happened when I was fourteen, on a day when the skies were clear and the waves in the bay were the pale blue-green of the glass insulators on the telephone poles by Route One. Dad was out pulling traps on the *38 Special*. I'd taken a picnic bag and our bird identification binoculars to Lily Pond, my private swimming place at the foot of the Hillside Cemetery in South Gouldsboro.

Spring had been unusually wet, and the numerous hard green thimbles of the wild raspberries looked like they'd make a record harvest. Day lilies burst from their stems. Mustard painted the high fields in a brilliant but-

ter glow, and spikes of fireweed swayed in the breezes that raked the boggy ground on the far side of the pond below. I sat with my towel and lunch on a worn rocky outcropping marked by the scat of a bear.

I was at an age when I felt I could handle any situation; the bear did not worry me. I'd seen teeth marks on a bear tree during my hike in, plus several gnawed tubers of jack-in-the-pulpit and a place where it had torn a hole in the ground to eat a nest of yellowjackets. A noble cause, that. So I held the heavy binoculars and hoped to spot the black fur of the animal as it cut a swath through the high grasses and stands of flowers. I must have looked down on the pond for an hour, noting the birds and the plants. In fact, I was so engrossed within the tunnel-vision perceptions of the lenses that I didn't hear the man approach me from behind.

"You Missy McCloskey," the voice said.

I looked up. Wilkins stood tall as a pillar beside me. Black shaggy hair and beard. A pinched face. Bloodshot eyes round as marbles.

"You got food in that poke?"

It wasn't really a question. People in the cove called Wilkins a simple man, even a stupid one when hard liquor exposed their meaner sides. He was retarded, but with a special talent which often confused easy definitions or labels for his behavior. He could sniff a handout or a dollar-to-be-lent with the unerring accuracy of a bloodhound tracking coon.

I wasn't surprised to find him in the pasture.

"Yeah. Two sandwiches. Want one?"

Wilkins took a sandwich and peeled it open like a book. He looked very much like a child. I imagined him saying the order of ingredients inside his head. Bread. Mayonnaise. Ham. Lettuce. Swiss cheese. Mayonnaise. Bread. He closed the sandwich and wolfed it in four bites, hardly stopping to chew.

"Whatalso." He slurred the words together.

"Nothing," I said. "I've got to go. I'm tracking a bear." He said, "You."

It was impossible to tell what he meant by the word. I gathered my stuff and stood to inspect the scat close up, then moved down the slope closer to the pond and the woods that lined the west side. Wilkins followed.

"You show me," he said. I assumed he meant the rest of my lunch. Or maybe where the bear hid. When he hit me, my neck snapped sideways and dark ink flooded my head, pooled with flashes of copper. I fell like a stone.

"Show me," he said and got down on his knees in the grass and pinned me, running a hand over the slick material of my bathing suit.

"Show me. Show me how. Show me."

He covered my mouth with one hand and tore the material, which exposed my breasts and crotch, but he couldn't rip the suit completely off me. It cut into my calves where I twisted under him.

He raised me a balled fist. "I hit."

I pretended to faint, hoping he'd give me enough air to fill my lungs . . . and scream. But he pressed hard on me with his body, forcing my wind out. His pants were down. I could feel his manhood poking against my ribs,

my stomach. I smelled the whiskey on his shirt, and I was scared then. Numb with fear at what would happen. He squirmed around, started to moan.

My head pounded. Chest burned when I breathed. Yet somehow I heard a sound from far off on the hill. A familiar voice. I bit into Wilkins's wrist and called out.

"Daddy!"

Wilkins rolled off me, his face flushed with shock. He stumbled into the trees and disappeared from sight.

When Joey Samples and Dad turned him in to the police at Winter Harbor that evening, his face was scratched and badly bruised. They said that when they cornered Rafe at John Milbridge's gravel pit, the man tried to claw his own eyes out. I suspected that was Joey's work. Dad would never lose his composure. Never get that emotional. But what I couldn't understand was how Dad found me, or why he thought to find me. He said he'd seen my note on the refrigerator and suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of terror and doom. He'd driven the cemetery road like a demon, as he put it.

I lay in bed that night staring out the window at the overcast that obscured the stars. Dad sat silently in the chair beside me until he fell asleep. Heat lightning ran like veins of fool's gold through the gray cloud formations. When the real storm came, the light and sharp cracks of thunder felt like emotions sputtering out of me.

At last, I cried.

I turn my ankle in a pothole, but that can't stop me. The air is suffused with light, growing brighter. My calves ache. The moment is near.

Is it the beat behind me or my kid's legs that propel me?

There were times when Dad paid less than his usual inattention to life, like the evening he bought vanilla ice cream clearly labeled "with real vanilla bean specks" and drove all the way back to Winter Harbor to show the store manager there was dirt in the carton. That story pleased the inhabitants of Bunker's Cove, perhaps because they too had been struck with such moments of blind ignorance in a world that changed too fast for them to keep pace with. They accepted him, but that acceptance did not rub off on me until I was ten, maybe eleven. I remember well the first time Dad allowed me on the wharves. Until then, he'd surmised that the locals wouldn't want a tomboy nosing around in their business.

The month was November, and the air had the feel of spring water as it slid across my skin. I still wore tee-shirts in defiance of the frost.

On that Friday, Dad was long overdue from his work day as a stern man for one of the lobster boats, so I marched down the hill to the wharf. I was determined. I sat on a crate like one of the good old boys and listened to them spin yarns about rough seas and choked engine lines and empty traps. Dad flashed me a questioning look every five minutes, but I ignored him. One of the others, it may well have been Joey, noticed me when I wrinkled my nose at the odor of dead waste fish sitting in a plastic tub on the next wharf.

"That smell's what it's all about. This ain't a social club."

A man with a salt-and-pepper beard said, "There you are." Rafe Wilkins grunted, his back against a piling, an orange bottle cap in the palm of his hand. Another man said, "If you can't take the heat, get outta the kitchen."

I replied by standing with my hands on hips. "I can take it. I'm just used to a cleaner kitchen."

"Well, girl," said Joey this time, his head wreathed in cigarette smoke. It was his bait company and his wharf next door. "You're welcome to do a bit of cleanin'."

That got a round of laughs. I said nothing. I walked away, around the rocks to the other wharf, and hauled an empty trash barrel from inside the Samples' bait shed. I proceeded to clean and hose things down. Later, they all said I could come down any time. Especially Joey.

"No need to ask," he said with a wink. "I'll teach you how to clean a fresh fish."

But it was Dad that always missed me if I didn't make an appearance. He wouldn't say so, not my stoic Dad, but he showed it in little ways. When I rode my bike or ran down the road to the wharves, he'd look up the hill, knowing I was there by mysterious means, and his smile would beam. That moment, when he smiled, made me feel light and giddy inside. I remember him best that way.

I reach the bottom of the hill. The wharves and buildings are masked in a brilliant white glare. Smoke seems to pour from the grain of the boards. I search for my father. I step as if through molasses, the air frothing hot and thick and sticky with humidity.

I panic with that overwhelming sense of terror and doom, as Dad once described it. There's no time left. I must tell him that I forgive him for the times we didn't get along. Where is he?

My first day in Bunker's Cove was uneventful. I was nine. I don't recall what Dad dressed like, or the car he drove then. I don't remember unpacking. Just the smell of wood catching fire in the kitchen stove the evening we moved into the house. Biting to the nose. Organic matter being consumed. And giving off energy, just like when he let his emotions go.

That day he forgot to open the damper when he lit the stove. Smoke flooded the kitchen. He cursed, then we laughed.

Dad, the tall and barrel-chested Dad of my youth, stands by the bait shed and gestures to Joey, I think. I'm happy that it's Joey, that he's here at the end as well. I can barely make them out as I push forward. The air smells piney, resinous. My chest burns as I breathe in. I breathe out and call to him. The syllable elongates between us. But when his face turns to me, the whole world goes blank.

The flash of annihilation, blanching everything white and seamless as bone. The superheated rush of it all. Before the collapse to pure nothingness. Yet it happens so slow. Can this go on forever, an attenuation of your atoms? The loneliness? This last spinning of synaptic charge?

I try to think of the event as his smile igniting the cosmos. The thought continues, like a runner who has crossed the finish line. . . . ♦

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Last Wish



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"Do not wish for wealth beyond compare," said the genie.

"Wealth beyond compare sounds pretty good," said Derek. He slid his thumbnail along the raised filigree of the battered oil lamp, marveling. The lamp had cost twenty dollars at the Goodwill. Two or three impulse purchases like that in a month, and he wouldn't make the rent. Wealth beyond compare would be a fine return on a twenty-dollar investment.

The genie towered above Derek. Derek did not understand how that was possible, since they were in his cramped, low-ceilinged basement apartment. He could jump and brush the ceiling with the palm of his hand, and he was not athletic.

"Why wouldn't I wish for that?" he asked the genie, craning his neck. Especially with two more wishes to follow.

The genie sighed, a deep sound that echoed in the water pipes along Derek's ceiling. "Over the eons, many have asked me for wealth. None have had joy of it."

"Why not?" Derek asked.

"Early, I destroyed them simply," said the genie. "I gave them wealth in gold and jewels. It filled their rooms and crushed them to death."

Derek felt the blood leave his face. This genie was, after

illustration by David Deitrick

all, a monster: ancient, powerful and incomprehensible. His high spirits vanished.

"I was less cruel then," said the genie. "Later, I did not allow the wealth to kill them immediately. I gave riches to peasants, who spent freely until robbers cut their simple throats. Others realized that wealth made them lords; but they did not know the ways of rule and self-preservation. They were overrun by enemies and destroyed, with their entire families."

"Throat dry," Derek asked, "What if they only spent the money as they needed?"

The genie nodded. "The cautious lived, at least the span of a mortal. Some lived high, but in a manner that would not attract attention. They died young when their livers gave out, or they lived long lives of trivial pleasures, berating themselves on their deathbeds with thoughts of how trivial those pleasures had been. Others hoarded their riches against discovery or waste, shivering up and becoming sour. These misers lived a long time. But they took no joy of it."

"Are you saying money destroys people?" Derek asked. He wanted to say it with heavy sarcasm, but an acute sense of the genie's might made the words come out in an appeasing squeak.

The genie's eyes were deep and dark. "I speak only of genie riches. I do not know what mortal wealth would be to your life. I know what I would give you. Do not ask for it."

Derek thought about why he wished for money. "Women, then," he said.

"Do not wish for women," said the genie.

"What," said Derek, "you'll fill the room with them and crush me?" Instantly he wished he hadn't said it, but the genie only shook its head.

"Early," it said, "I destroyed men quickly with women. Men who wished to unfailingly draw women could not walk on the street without women hanging on their arms, their backs, their necks, pleading, promising, begging. Some were lucky, trampled to death by women who later could hardly comprehend or remember the strange dream that had come over them."

"I wouldn't need *all* women," Derek said.

"Some asked for one woman," the genie said. "She would be the woman of another man, who would slay them both in their bed. Or she would be a woman the wisher despised."

"They must not have asked very carefully." He thought of Lisa, who worked in a different department at Woolworth's. She was short and dark and curvy and she told the best dirty jokes of anyone in the store. He had been thinking of asking her to a movie, except he didn't know if she'd say yes, and if she did, he didn't know if he should invite her for coffee after, and if he did, his apartment was a mess.

"Later, I grew crueler. She would be the woman he dreamed of, but she would change over the years, becoming lazy or angry or ugly, still never leaving, inextricably enchanted to him. Or he would ask for her to never change to him, to be the same girl who besotted his adolescent eyes. He would become, as the years

passed, a changed, matured man with a naïve wife whose simple, girlish love clung to him. Some of these killed themselves; others cheated on these lovers who had become strangers, and who would forgive them anything; but these never found happiness elsewhere. They had asked for the love of only one woman."

"But love doesn't have to be like that," Derek said, troubled.

"I speak of genie-given love. The lives that humans make with each other, I do not know. I know what I would give you. Do not ask for it."

Derek had passed his thirtieth summer. As time slipped away, he was no longer confident of his ability to make a good life for himself. When he was sixteen, there had been all the time in the world. Nearly another sixteen years had run away with his life. He thought about all this and said, "Then . . ."

"Do not wish for immortality!" thundered the genie.

Derek fell back into his battered sofa, clutching the cushions. The lamp rattled on the floor.

"Early," the genie said, its voice rumbling deeper than a jackhammer, "I gave men who wished for immortality endless life, but I did not give them youth and health. They ached, they shriveled, they blew away. They cursed me with ruined voices."

"Later, I grew crueler. Much crueler. I gave them eternal life, with eternal health and youth."

And the genie stopped.

Derek waited. Finally he took a deep breath. "What is wrong with life?"

In a distant voice, the genie said, "I do not know what humans can make of their lives. Those I gave immortality found eternity to be of no meaning. They might acquire money, harems, power. They might give it up and spend centuries in contemplation. They contemplated how to live, when all they loved died around them. None found an answer. I do not know human life. I know genie immortality. Do not ask for it." Derek could not see the genie's face. There seemed to be an oppressive air in the room; it seemed darker.

Derek picked up the lamp and put it carefully on the table by the sofa. It had looked old when he had felt the whim to spend everything in his wallet on it at the Goodwill; now he felt it must be the oldest thing in the world. "What should I wish?" he said quietly.

The genie's voice was a murmur. "Ask for things a genie cannot foul," it said. "Ask for human things."

"What?"

"Ask," said the genie, "for these two things. Ask that you always find work which satisfies and interests you, for which you are justly compensated."

It was not riches beyond compare, but Derek had been thinking lately he would like to leave Woolworth's and teach music to children. Only the fear he wouldn't make enough to live on had stopped him. Justly compensated. Always find work that would satisfy. He nodded. "And?"

"Ask for the wisdom to know and appreciate your friends. I have noticed," said the genie, "that humans seem to have a large capacity for enjoying each other,

when they are not too frightened or blind to accept it, or too greedy to think their happiness lies elsewhere. You are social creatures, you humans. You die without other humans."

Derek thought about Lisa again. He thought about the gang he argued about baseball with after work, at the diner.

"I thought you wanted to trick me," he said. "But I don't see the trick. Anything else? Health?"

"I am a powerful spirit," said the genie. "I would not have you ask me for something I do not need to do. I see that you will have a long life, as human lives go, and that you will be as comfortable as a human may expect to be."

"But why should I trust you?" said Derek. "You've described terrible things. I don't understand why you did all of them. I don't understand why you'd change now."

"You cannot," said the genie. "It takes millennia to become truly cruel. It takes power to act on ancient bitterness. But, over the eons, even spirits can change again. You are a human. You will never understand. Be grateful."

"I wish, then," said Derek, "for the two things you suggested, exactly as you suggested them."

"As you command," said the genie.

Nothing happened.

Derek remembered Lisa mentioning that her cousin was on the school board, and that he'd told her they'd had a contribution to expand the arts program. He had brushed it off, figuring he couldn't get the job. But Lisa liked him—she liked him a lot: she wouldn't have mentioned it if she hadn't thought he had a shot. He reached for the phone.

"As cruel as I was, I was never wholly cruel."

Derek dropped his hand. Somehow phoning Lisa had

suddenly seemed more important than the genie that filled his apartment. He didn't know how that could be.

Then he *did* know.

"You are so powerful," he said, slowly. "Yet you say you've been released from that lamp over and over. What could trap you, so often?"

"The eons are long. My power cannot transcend itself. All the things I have done to mortals: what consequence are they?"

"A lot of consequence, to them," said Derek. "How many people did you destroy? Is that what you've lived for?"

"Be glad you cannot understand a genie's bitterness. But I say again: in my cruellest wishes granted, I was never wholly cruel."

"I don't understand."

"When I granted the worst wish, I always made sure the human saved one wish. That was my kindness. None of the immortal ever failed to use that wish, after time. After enough time."

"That wish?"

"You know that wish."

To die, Derek thought.

The genie watched him.

"Whatever your reasons, you have been good to me," Derek said slowly. "You've left me one wish."

The genie was silent.

"I grant my last wish to you."

The apartment was empty. The lamp lay on its side on the table. Its great age and strange beauty seemed to have left it. It was a cheap-looking piece of tin.

Derek thought for a long time before he was ready to pick up the phone.

Then he picked it up, called Lisa, and lived the rest of his human life. ♦

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Deadwise

Jak Koke
and
Jonathan Bond

The hover's autopilot fails.

Sly is the first to notice as the air in the small cabin goes stale. He is the first to react as the dancing lights of the instrument panel go dead. Reflexes born of snowblading wipeouts help him to snap his safety harness free.

A flash of movement outside the window snags his attention as he slides across the plush seat, trying to wedge himself between the buckets, into the front. He knows what the movement is and screams.

Mom and Papasan don't notice the Nikitoan Speedster flashing out of an alley, shearing a lightpole at the base. They don't see the small craft

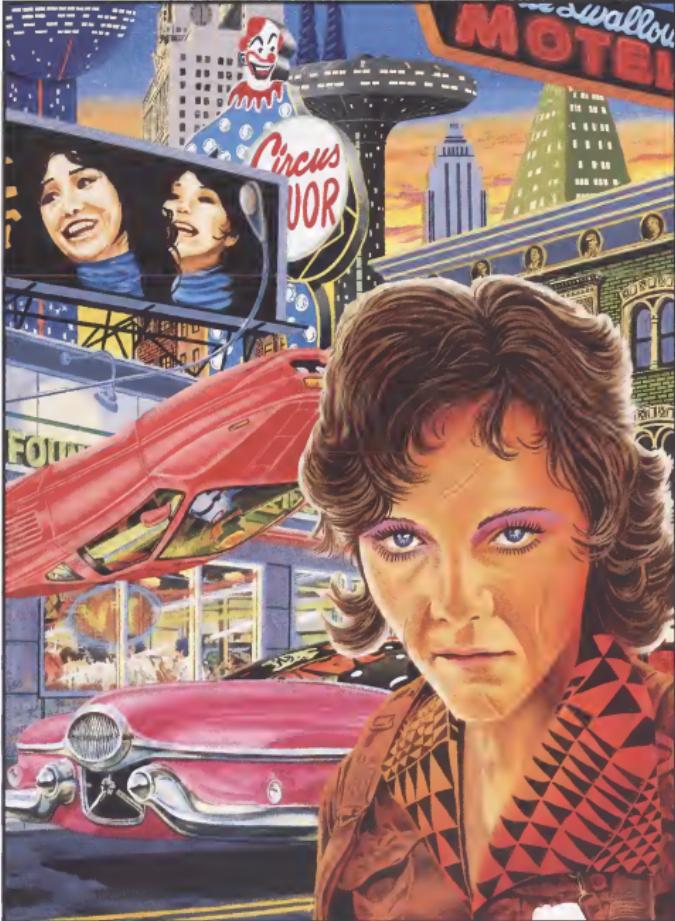


Illustration by Kent Bash

as it slides sidewise in front of them, as its back end spins toward the foreshield. All they notice is Sly's scream. Both turn toward him to find the trouble.

Sly stretches for the manual controls. Got to pull hard right, but Papasan has made the realization and is there already.

Not fast enough.

Sly's fingers brush his father's shoulder as the foreshield rushes in to meet them.

All after is blanksheet.

Except for the strange memories.

A pinpoint of whiteness wavers on the edge of fadeout somewhere leftwise, fluttering in the current of dark silk.

He swims toward it now, a singularity cutting smoothly through the billowing, black cumulus. The white flutter approaches in pulses like a beacon . . . and engulfs him.

He's running in an adult body, a body that belongs to Jonesy Ripka. He has strong muscles, a quick mind. He hurdles a pile of trash, speeds past a circle of junkies, ducks into another alley and checks for exits. The bitch is still back there somewhere. He decides to risk a peep behind him and flashes a glance over his right shoulder. Was that her two blocks back, behind the garbage? He figures seventy-five percent surely. At least.

As he runs, buildings tower above him like mountains of filth and neon video advertising on the verge of collapsing under their own weight. Phoenix has sent a hover to help him escape. The bodiless boy-devil will get him out if he can go just bit farther. He nears the end of the alley with heavy, gasping strides. A few more and . . .

Deadwise stands before him—a dark form in the center of the alley, the streetlamp a dull, yellow halo behind her. The Ivory Tower's tusked elephant symbol rides ghost-white over her heart.

He pulls up, slow motion, lifting his pistol, but as he aims and fires, she's gone. A sharp smell of ozone crackles around him as the shell tears a chunk of building away. Why in Fin's name is she toying with me? he wonders, scanning the walls with the weapon's green-laser sight.

Something moves and he fires, obliterating an oversized rat and leaving a gaping hole in the pavement. The shot rings crystal in the following silence. He spins one-eighty, the slow-mo pulling at his gut.

Nothing but filth. No Deadwise.

Snic, he hears, and it's raining blood, his blood. Pain slides into his brow as a red curtain drips over his left eye. He fires at random. Is that her? Spin, maybe that shadow.

Something slams him against the wall and his right hand jerks. One, then two blows hit him before he knows his gun is gone. He tries to double over, but she vises a claw around his neck, lifts him and lets his feet dangle.

He opens his good eye to look at her. There is something inherently false about the slate-gray, bottom-feeder eyes that hold his stare—eyes set in a face that was once attractive. Until the scarring.

His feet tingle with numbness, and his breath comes in ragged gasps. He strikes at the scarred face beneath the V-cut of auburn hair. A fist connects with her jaw, and blades of pain slice along his arm.

Deadwise responds with a brief smile and follows it by slamming his skull against the wall. For an encore, she clenches her grip to cut off his air. With a graceful, liquid movement, her other hand pulls a small, metal scanner out of her thigh pouch, flicks a switch and runs the probe sideways across his head, checking for the stolen sequence.

The smile returns as she finds it. Her grin is broad this time, showing clean, strong teeth. Morbidly attractive she is, savagely beautiful. On that smile alone, odds of survival plummet—less than ten percent now.

As he begins to fade, the pain in his chest causes rainbow colors to dance in his brain; red curtains, green lasers, bright white teeth, so bright they blind.

Deadwise glances left, a blur of motion. She also sees the blinding whiteness.

A hover. Phoenix has come through at last. Survival odds jump to twenty percent.

The bitch turns to him again, rage twisting her scarred visage. Her mouth forms words. "Jonesy, you deserve worse than—" The rest is swallowed by the screaming blowers. She snaps his head left, and in a brief flash he sees the hover crash through a mountain of garbage.

Too late, he thinks, even as he hears the dry, brittle crunch of his neck breaking. The light fades and she is gone.

He doesn't feel it when the hover hits and launches him across the alley. All he feels is irony when he lands, and the sequence flashes in his mind—a series of letters and numbers he fought so hard to steal from her Ivory Tower. The sequence is loud and strong, but it will never get to Phoenix, and the boy will never get into a body where he can be killed.

Jonesy has failed. His father will remain unavenged.

Less than one percent now. The sequence fades.

Sly wakes with lines of letters and numbers fluttering behind his eyes. The antiseptic sour reminds him of the clinic in Portland, of Quackman Garth and his hard-candy suckers. He's on a hard mattress, cool and rough. Hair cut to stubble; pillows prop up his head. Washed up in Quackpalace, he works it; gotta be. He risks a peep.

He's flatbacked on a skinny sprawler in a peck-sized room which boasts five things: the sprawler, him included; the IV skeleton beside him; a flap in the wall marked "LAUNDRY" in blocked red letters; a dim ceiling bulb; and last, a dangling panic button stamped with a pictogram of a man/fem carrying a tray.

No sign of parents anywhere.

He wonders vaguely where they are and wonders just why he is back with the Quacks. He remembers the brittle snapping of his own neck, and a sequence of letters and numbers. No, he thinks, that's not what happened. No way. Must've been a dream.

Where are Mom and Papasan? he wonders, and a dull ache runs down his arms and back. He decides to ask

somebody and reaches up to push the pictobutton of the sexless one.

His call is flashing urgent at the desk, and he can see through the door-window that a nurse of about Mom's age is moving his direction. The door boots open and the fem enters, wearing the usual white coat Sly has seen so often on the vid, complete with the Quack symbol on the lapel—intertwining snakes. She totes the inevitable water and zoneland pill cup. "How are you feeling today, Sylvester?"

Better than righteous, or penitent for that matter, he thinks, silently cursing his mother for the grandfather's name. What comes out, however, is simply, "I believe that I'm all right, ma'am." And as he sits up, he realizes despite the ache he feels strong.

"Good, good," she says. "Now, you take this pill and drink the water. It will help you sleep."

He takes the zoneland and water from her. "My mother and father?"

The fem does a double-take.

She looks like she's at a funeral already, he thinks, and his stomach does high gees as she says in a vidtoon voice, "Now you just take that little pill there. Your rest is important. The doctor will be here to see you in just a moment."

He raises the pill cup to his mouth and drains the water, returning both empty containers to her.

"Just hold tight 'til the doctor gets here." The 'toon voice again, and she turns to leave.

As if I had some F'en place to go, he thinks as the door closes behind him. He reaches up and pulls the zoneland from under his tongue, noticing the pictogram phoenix emblazoned on its side. In his mind he sees a place he's never been: a massive, blue-black set of spires rise in a slow-twisting, double helix above the cruddy dinge of the city. A flicker of hate makes him crush the pill, the pictogram phoenix. He wonders why.

The sound of muffled voices, an argument perhaps, drifts from beyond the door. Sly looks up. Maybe it's Mom and Papasan. No luck, only the large nurse with the 'toon voice doing the chat with someone on the vid-phone.

It comes back to him then like fragments of a frozen dream—the shuttle from Portland to LAX, and his first look at LAGMA. The Los Angeles Greater Metropolitan Area was spread like an infection on southern California.

After landing, Mom and Papasan rented a hover and, for Sly's sake, programmed the autopilot for the same turnpike Slammin' Sammy Dougan had used to stop Sledge Front in last year's Tollrunner finale. Slammin' Sammy and The Crew were Sly's favorite Tollrunners.

Papasan, pointing out the marina, and Mom, listening to the hover's tourguide.

The autopilot failing.

Sly, the only one of the three who saw the Nikitoan Speedster swerve out of the alley. Then everything clicking into delay mode as he reached over the seat to grab the console.

The Nikitoan spinning into the foreshield.

What happened to his parents? Where are they?

A hollow feeling forms in his gut then, and he wishes for the stuffed bear that had been a present from Papasan the Christmas before last. Just after his twelfth birthday.

Just after the wipeout.

The wipeout was the last time he'd been in Quack-palace—nearly two years ago.

He'd been chuting the ravine all day when Mom called him in for dinner.

"Just one more run!" he yelled, thinking about Rosalind Heath, who'd dared him to chute Sleeper's Run. Rosalind eyed him with superiority—the ruby, downward curve of her upper lip, her cheeks rosy from the cold air, her nose held high in mock aristocracy.

He turned and cased the run. It ran ruddy and narrow, angling slantways across the slope, then cutting sharply over the edge of the ravine and through the trees—deathwish heaven. If he wimped out, Rosalind would never speak to him again, never smile at him again.

Suck it in and go for it, he thought.

After a short smile from Rosalind, he pulled the snowblade next to him and aimed it into the heart of Sleeper's Run. Prep for the worst, he thought, and rushed the chute. For Rosalind.

The small fiberglass craft smoked the cleft dead center and picked up so much rip in the first thirty seconds that there was no way he could bail. Icy air dug spines into his face as the snowblade plunged toward the steep edge of the ravine. He ducked into the 'blade as it launched over the rim and caught air.

His craft landed hard, groaning under the strain, and he looked down to see the emergency lights proclaiming that it was bail or fry. When he looked up again to see the run jag between two huge redwoods, he lost his nerve and tried to peel off into another chute.

He cut the turn too hard and flipped the 'blade. The sky spun above and below him in the split-second before he hit the tree. The snowblade was gone, and he knew that it was wipeout o'clock. The tree rushed up to meet him like Slammin' Sammy Dougan's huge Kenworth, but not before he could put a foot in front of him.

The snowblade split in two, but his leg didn't fare as well—cracked in five places. Luckily, nothing else broke.

He was taken to the clinic in Portland, fed on hard-candy suckers until he was sick, and let out on exo-crutches the next day—Christmas Day. Scrapped a great vacation, he thought, and though he didn't blame Rosalind and her sweet face, he swore he'd do slave-action for no one, ever again. From now on, decisions were his and his alone.

At home, the sundered 'blade was piled like streetkill in the drive. Merry F'en Christmas, he thought to himself, quickly apologizing to the Fin for taking its name in vain, and having visions of it slicing out of the ocean toward him. Mom always said the Fin would rise up and bend all the bad little boyos. It gave Sly the 'jeebies.

He gimped into the house to discover his Christmas surprise, the one Papasan had fussed about, had said would help his leg heal. Visions edged into his mind of a new snowblade, red on black, a slick scorpion on the

slope. When Papasan handed him the package, he felt a hard fall coming on.

The present was peck-sized and looked even smaller in his father's hands. Sly tried to hide it, but his disappointment was evident when he opened the package and saw the worn bear, one eye missing, and much of its stuffing flat and bulging at odd angles like some elephantiasis casualty.

When he saw the look on his father's face, Sly summed up his best fixture and said, overbright, "Thanks, Papasan. Really, I like it a lot."

Papasan's hand touched Sly's head. "Sometimes valuable things come in ugly packages, my son. Don't judge too quickly what you don't understand."

"I broke my arm when I was your age. My father gave this to me when I got home from the hospital, and whenever I got hurt, the bear was always there for me."

Sly hid the stuffed animal in the closet the next day.

Now, flatbacked and in pain on the Quackpalace sprawner, he'd give most anything to have a tight grip on it. He rolls left, and a wave of dull ache moves from his chest to his head and stays there. Sly feels like Slammin' Sammy Dougan has driven Tollrunner on his skull, and The Crew has cracked rupture-city on the rest of his body.

Sly pulls the pillow into the pocket of a fetal crouch as a substitute for his bear, but it does little good. Finally he shifts onto his back again, and decides to harden his will. Prep for the worst, he thinks.

Muffled voices drift from the lobby, close this time. "He's been asking about his parents."

"I'll take care of it." The voice is low and soft. "But notify neuropsych just in case."

The door seams open, and Quackman himself walks in, white lab coat matching the color of his hair. The doc comes close up to Sly with those Quackman peepers, scrutinizing. The small light makes his hair turn chrome and shadows the many wrinkles in his face. "How are you feeling, Sylvester?"

Originality in limited supply hereabouts, thinks Sly. A pictogram phoenix sweeps through his mind, and he says, "I'm sleepy, sir."

"Good, good. You are a very lucky boy."

Sly looks at him blankly. Okay, he thinks, get to the point already.

"You were in a very bad accident and suffered severe injury to the brain. In fact, we were about to box you up." He looks down, clears his throat. "Ah, but a donor with matching cerebral genotype was found at the last minute. It was close enough that we could do a partial cellular exchange. The procedure is still very new, but I think everything went rather smoothly."

Quackman pauses to give himself a congratulatory smile. "It was touch-and-go for a while there," he continues. "At best, you would've been comatose, but even though the donor's body was well past even our capability to repair, his brain was in nearly perfect condition. Yes," he muses, "you are a very lucky boy."

Yeah, thinks Sly, sitting up and stretching his arms against the pain, real lucky.

Quackman moves next to the sprawner and takes Sly's shaved head in his hands, tilts it toward him. "You're healing exceptionally well, but you may experience some discomfort, and vague images may trouble your dreams, but that should pass."

Vague images? thinks Sly, remembering Deadwise and her death grip around his neck. His hand moves absentmindedly to his throat. He looks hard at the doc. "Are my parents dead, sir?" His voice does a puberty punctuation on the last word.

Quackman peers hardline down at Sly, but when he speaks, his voice is soft. "Yes, Sylvester, your parents are dead. Both vehicles were scrapped. You were the only survivor. It's a miracle of the Fin that you're here at all."

"How long . . . ?" The crack in his voice is annoying.

Quackman gives him a puzzled look. "How long? You mean, how long have you been here?"

Sly nods.

"The parameds brought you in yesterday afternoon."

Yesterday? he thinks. One day? Hard to figure. Brain damage and experimental surgery followed by a recovery period of less than twenty-four hours. How possible?

The steel-blue image of a monstrous double helix flashes into his mind, and a wave of fear-nausea creeps over Sly's gut. The quick healing, he knows suddenly, comes from a transposable cluster of genes that boost his internal repair past normal, way past.

The gene cluster was advance payment from Phoenix for a burglary at Deadwise's Ivory Tower, a burglary that failed in the end. Then he remembers a holler hitting him painlessly, launching Jonesy's body across a dark alley. "Sir," he says, looking up at the doc, "could I have a drink of water?"

Quackman stands, smiles down at Sly. "Of course, my boy. I'll tell the nurse, and if you need anything else, you know how to ring." He turns to leave.

As the doc moves for the exit, Sly looks through the door-window, past Quackman to the reception area. The nurse with the 'toon voice is doing the chat with someone in a battle-class, enviroblend suit.

As the door boots full open, Sly sees the nurse swing and point in his direction. The suit swings as well, in the smooth way that vidstars do, and when he sees her face, the delay time cuts in and the 'jeebies do a razor-dance down his spine. The scarred face rides beneath a V-cut of auburn hair, and her bottom-feeder eyes make contact with his.

As she accelerates toward him in an inhumanly smooth blur, a word self-propels into his brain. "Joella," he hears himself say, and he knows Deadwise has a name.

The 'jeebies start kicking his heart around as the door seams to a close, leaving an image in Sly's mind of Deadwise/Joella halfway across the lobby, and the memory of a viselike grip on his neck.

He tumbles off the sprawner, pulling over the IV skeleton with a crash, hits the floor on his feet and races toward the door. As it starts to open, he slams into it sideways and punches the lock stud. He stands, gasping for air, as the door chokes to a close behind him.

He scans the room. "Cluetime, Sly," he says. "Keep it solid. Escape is the wise side of living; anything else is food for the Fin."

A loud thud sounds on the door. Another on the glass.

"Hey, you can't go in there! That's—" A *snic* cuts Quackman's voice to a wet gurgle.

The *snic* sends 'jeebie' waves through Sly. There's pain in his brow, memory of blood. His eyes slam home on the blocked red lettering: LAUNDRY. The flap is small, but there's not much choice. Here F'en goes.

A ripple moves through the door as he launches himself across the room. He passes the bed rightwise and looks back as the door cracks rupture-city, light spilling in from the lobby, framing Deadwise in flashing-metal brightness. Quackman is on the floor behind her, dancing in a crimson pool of his own blood.

Sly finds the chute and dives in. As he begins to fall, she kicks across the room, and her unforgettable claws snag the leg of his pajamas.

He is caught instantly, but the thin cotton shreds in her grasp. He plunges into the black, arms wrapped over his shaved head.

Sly hits bottom and plummets sideways down the mountain of slickstained bedding heaped in the center of a whitewashed hoverhanger. He rolls until he hits the floor, pushes to his feet and scans for an exit. There it is, full open, big enough for a cargohover. He dashes for it, bare feet slapping against the concrete.

He skids through the exit and angles leftwise up the long access tunnel. As he looks to the end of the ramp, he glimpses the scarred face through a window up ahead. He sees the ugly weapon she's using to split through the window and fights down a flicker of panic—an urge to turn and flee. But the window has the slight distortion of lexan. Slammin' Sammy could smash at it with his Kenworth and it wouldn't break.

Confidently, Sly lengthens his stride, knowing he's safe for now.

Deadwise hits the window with the butt of the weapon as he nears, cracking the lexan. As he passes, a wicked piece of the clear polymer snags the bottom of his foot, slicing into it like the Fin through water. He pushes on, trying to ignore the pain.

Deadwise swings again—more cracks, but it's not shattering. She turns and vanishes into the background, liquid quick.

He glimpses the end of the tunnel, catching the city's reflection in the glass structure across the street, and darts up the final meters of the ramp. Neon and city-bright towers of mirror-black lean over him—precarious canyons of vidscreen and shiny streetways. Sprinkles of rain cool his face as he muscles around the corner, flashing a glance to the wet street behind him. Good, no Deadwise.

He spins his head to look forward, but sees the blur of movement too late and plunges into something larger than himself—a mass of too many arms and legs, tumbling on the streetway.

"F'en pipsqueak! Look where you're headed!"

His stomach lurches into his throat, but when he looks

up, it's just a fem of about fifteen with blue hair plated to the sides of her head like she slept on it wet. She pulls him to his feet.

She tops him by millimeters, the multiple nose rings skewing her bitsy, red-checked face. Emerald eyes beneath blue brows hold his gaze. Something else is strange, but he doesn't waste time looking close. He peeps around frantically for Deadwise, but comes up blanksheet. Nothing.

Wet salt slides down his cheeks. He tries to run, but the fem holds him firm.

"Listen, fem, there's someone going to bend my bones if you don't let me loose."

She does a quick make of him, her blue hair reflecting the streetlamp as she looks him up and down. She catches the shaved head, the torn hospital pajamas, and the blood from his IV insert doing a slow drip-drip on the streetway. "Boyo, you'd best replace yourself before they find you're gone. Your parents will be the ones bending parts if—"

"Please. There's a deadwise with major armament. She's sliced and diced, and I'm next, so let me go . . ." His voice does a slow fade as he watches her face go slack, her gaze riveted behind him. He turns to see Deadwise/Joella herself, streaming down the street toward them, pulling the ugly thing from under her coat, aiming it. He begins to wail.

A hand clamps over his mouth, and he feels himself being yanked sideways and down an alley. Bluehair tows him with as much kick as she can muster, while he stumbles and tries to keep up. They round the corner of the docking bay into a deadend alley heaped with trash. Sly remembers dying in a similar spot less than a day earlier.

She stops and looks for something amid the garbage. Sly spins to watch hindwise.

Bluehair searches.

The wail pushes to the surface as Sly sees Deadwise round the corner, kicking toward them. Something inside him figures thirty-percent survival odds and falling.

Bluehair finds it—a magnetic sewer cover—and punches in a code. The cover breathes loose and the fem bends down to move it, extending a waldo from under her citysuit. The waldo is a mechanical arm, thin and flexible, each section of laminated fibermesh designed to fit inside the one before. At the end, three mechanical fingers snap open and closed. The waldo telescopes down to help her arms edge the plate to one side.

Now Sly realizes what was strange about her: the waldo. He wonders what other iceware she may be hiding.

"Get in!" she shouts, and the waldo shoots back and heaves him into the hole.

He falls less than a meter and hits metal griddling. He lands solid, but the mesh bites into his injured foot.

Gunsshots thunder in the alley.

The fem jumps down, replacing the cover with her arms and waldo. Then the last hints of light are gone, and she hits a switch. The griddling begins to fall. "I put a randomizer on the code," she says. "Should keep her busy for a while."

As they plunge into the darkness, the air thickens, congeals into a putrid heaviness. Sly breathes through his mouth, and tries to figure how far down they go.

The gridding hits liquid with a splash and continues downward as muck swirls up around their legs.

The fem hits the switch and they stop. "We'll have to climb across from here." A small pinlamp flickers on, held in the waldo, revealing a metal lattice along a concrete wall.

Sly can't see the other side of the cavern, and he's surprised at its size. He wonders in horror if it's the famous Pit of old L.A. where the victims of a terrible plague were left to rot and die. He remembers the vids—shows of the Zombies—how they managed to survive the plague in the network of wormhole tunnels under the city by eating each other and stealing children and homeless for food and experimentation.

"Come on. This way." Bluehair steps off the platform and heaves onto the latticework, angling up and left, keeping just above the swirling sludge.

Sly follows, quick as he can, his foot throbbing with pain.

When he's off the platform, the fem's waldo extends and hits the switch.

It sinks into the flow and disappears.

The mechanical arm telescopes out another meter and punches a button just right of the platform runners. Muted churning of far-off machinery rumbles in the cavern. The muck rises to touch Sly's toes. The sewer is flooding. Fast.

The small light arcs leftwise. She is moving up the metalwork now, quicker than he can follow. She reaches a two-meter wormhole and swings inside.

He tries to climb closer, but an image of a Zombie gang waiting in the wormhole sends icewaves through his bones. He can't get his hands to budge. He feels the bubbling, black sludge rising coldly around his knees.

The scraping sound of a metal plate comes from high above.

The waldo grabs him, tries to lift him. "Let go!" Bluehair yells, but his hands won't move. The urine-smelling muck is waist-high now, and the waldo has pulled one hand free. "F'en 'speak, she's in. Only a minute before—"

A blinding beam of light penetrates the putrid dark, a pinpoint spreading from high above. He remembers bilowing clouds of silk and wishes for sleep. The beam is searching the wall in quick arcs. Deadwise is on the lattice, moving down.

The waldo yanks him free, pulls him into the wormhole. They run, the pinlamp slicing through the thick darkness. He glimpses bits and pieces of the arcing sides of the wormhole. Defaced warning signs and graffiti cover the tunnel's walls. He knows from the vid that all wormholes eventually lead to the Pit, and he wonders whether he should turn back and try to make it past Deadwise and leave the chance of hitting Zombieville to the fem.

She pulls him rightwise into another wormhole, kills the light, and keeps running. He can't see anything, but

feels the cold muck rising about his feet now, filling the wormholes. Bluehair must have hit the flood switch, he figures.

He wishes for light, wanting to see Bluehair's face and ask her about the Zombies, but she's moving too fast, and it's hard to breathe in the heavy stench. As they run, he listens for pursuit, but gets nothing but the splash of their feet and the rasp of their breath echoing in the dead tunnels. Even Deadwise has to make some sound in this sludge, he figures.

He hopes.

They pass 'hole after 'hole, turn too many times to count. Twice he stumbles and she uses the waldo to reach back and keep his face out of the sludge. He reaches for her, and she accepts his hand urgently, pulling him forward.

He thinks of his father, and a heavy weight settles on his chest. His face is wet with tears. He wants to stop, to fall and sit in the slime and wait for Mom and Pasapan. He wants to die and wake up. No such luck, gasping for breath, as she pulls him now left, now right. They pass through two cavernous spaces like the first one, having to climb across in the dark.

Finally, the fem is leading him up slantwise from the muck. They come to a dry wormhole, smaller than the others and almost clean-smelling. It angles upward and ends at a metallic wall.

The pinlamp flares on again like the sun. It's out before Sly figures what's happening, and the purple spot where it was moves with his eyes. He hears her fingers pressing an old-style digipad, and the wall seams at one side and slides open. He is pulled inside, stumbles and falls to the floor. He hears the wall slide closed, and his head sinks to his chest. Fire shivers up his leg from his foot.

Bluehair staggers off into the dark.

Suddenly the air is blinding as the overhead lights come on, and he squeezes his peepers shut and listens to the fem as she digs through her tools.

Sly opens his eyes, using fingers to brush tears from his cheeks. From near the door comes the sound of an acetylene torch and burnt-metal smells. An image comes to his mind of Deadwise cutting through the door. He heaves to his feet and spins to face the sound, squinting in the light.

Nothing.

Nothing but Bluehair, wearing goggles and hefting a large torch with both hands. She is welding two chunks of steel alloy into a wedge, holding the glowing metal with her waldo.

Sly flinches from the torchlight and decides to ask what the Fin she's doing when she turns, stopping him with a hardline stare. Asking him the same question. He decides to keep his mouth closed and just watch.

Bluehair finishes her wedge and jams it into the edge of the door while it's still aglow. Drip-bonding a special seal, he figures.

Sly inspects the place more carefully now, propping himself on his good foot and leaning against the wall. The squat is nothing more than a widening of the worm-

hole. It's lit by three growlamps hanging from a spider-web structure made of shiny fibermesh.

Must have city-juice, he thinks, noticing the fresh air. Clean breathing means big filters. Too big for any battery rig.

In the near corner, a pile of sheets and blankets sits on a foamflake frame, and jutting from the other wall is a workstation of considerable size. The workstation fascinates him. He recognizes a Sephacume gene-fusion system and purification rig. There is some kind of holopad jacked to it, but Sly isn't sure what its function could be. In fact, he isn't even sure how he knows what it is.

Bluehair finishes another wedge and stands, pulling off the goggles and wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her sleeve. She twists the regulator valve closed and wheels the canister over to the workstation. Her gaze sweeps over Sly more than once.

"Whose squat?" he asks, not enjoying the silence.

She turns and gives him that hardline stare again. "Squat's mine." She pulls heavy gloves from her hands and drapes them over the canister.

Sly sits on the floor and asks, "Lonewise?"

She sits across from him, back to a leg of the workstation. "Yeah," she says, "lonewise." She tosses him a rag, starts to unzip her citysuit. She peels the suit down to her waist, revealing small breasts.

Sly looks down.

His foot looks worse than it feels, black spread with rot and a mosaic of thin, violet scars, healing rapidly without infection. He wipes away the rot to get a better look at the damage. Impossible, he thinks. The cut is dirty, but uninjected and not bleeding, although the separated flaps of skin would suggest a need for sutures and a culture graft.

Bluehair is not doing so well. Blackened blood has scabbed over a wound in her arm where a bullet grazed the surface. She hauls out a medkit from under the workstation, sets it between her legs, and looks at him. "That fem?" she says nodding to the door.

Sly gets a visual of Deadwise, an audible *snic*, as 'jeebies shiver across his shoulders. He pushes himself farther from the door. "You mean Deadwise?"

"No, I mean your mother. Who do you think?" The fem unwinds the waldo and unjacks it from a socket next to her left breast. "Who is this Deadwise?" She lifts the waldo's harness off her shoulders and sets it under the workstation.

"You want specifics?" He finishes with his feet and notices the sticky red on his arm. He pulls out the IV insert and cleans away the blood.

When Bluehair is done removing the waldo, she opens the medkit and takes out a scalpel. "I just want to know what in Fin's name you got me into." As she speaks, her nose-rings wiggle in a way that makes Sly think of Rosalind Heath back home. "This Deadwise is all icepacked," she continues, tossing him a healpatch and scraping at her scabbing with the blade.

Sly looks blank.

"Installed Cybernetic Enhancements. You know what that is, kid?"

Sly nods, "Yes, I know."

"She's got more rip than any icepack I've seen, and that means credits, kid. Major payout. And more, she's no ordinary Deadwise. All her iceware is strictly hidden." Bluehair looks down at her own jack, then stands and walks toward him, still scraping at her arm. "So now that I have time to think a few seconds, I keep askin' myself, 'What's so much 'pack want with a pipsqueak like you?'"

He looks down at the tattered Quackpalace pajamas and rubs the stubble on his head. He tries to piece it for her. "I can't be sure, but here's how I work it. Deadwise has killed twice in the last day, and once was me, or at least someone who's in my head."

She gives him the hardline again. "Explain."

"Our autopilot failed, and we wiped, rupture-city, with another hover. Everything was scrapped. My father . . ." He swallows, tries again. "My father and mother are swimming with the Fin, they say."

She softens her gaze.

"I had brain damage, so they did a patch from some unlucky boyo by the name of Jonesy Ripka. As I work it, Deadwise snapped Jonesy's neck, then found out about the patch, so—"

"So you're screwed. You and me both, kid." She applies cleaner to the wound, wincing. "But you're in a haven for a while, at least until we can figure a solution." She stands up and points to a folding flap in the chrome webbing. "You can take a chemshower while I make some food."

It doesn't sound like a request.

Sly stands shakily on his good foot and begins scrolling the shower down. He stops, says, "What's your name? Mine's Sly."

She smiles, bandaging the wound with a healpatch. "Maleficent Rose," she says, "but you call me Rose."

He likes the name. "Rose," he says, rolling it off his tongue to himself, setting up the shower. He pulls his pajamas off, slightly embarrassed, but not wanting to show it. But she's not even looking.

She grabs a bottle of water from the shelves. "Wipe rags in the pile on the bed," she says.

He pulls the plastic tight around him, flicks heavy cykle, and closes his eyes as the chemicals scrub at his flesh. It's all over in three minutes.

When he's done, she hands him a clean citysuit.

He thanks her, dries himself, and puts it on. It fits him comfortably—a one-piece, vatsilk jump with a full-length, seamless zipper and a small, velcro flap for the waldo. He towels his head dry and folds the shower back into the webbing.

She returns to the nukebox where foodstuff is cooking. It smells like Mexican to Sly. He's feeling good by now, clean and hungry. "How'd you win a place like this?"

"Came down the wormhole a year ago," she says. "Arranged it with a friend of mine. He found this place a long time ago when he was running from some corporate heavies. The place is invisible to them, doesn't exist in any network."

She slaps brown piles of foodstuff on baby-blue plastic

shingles. "I was flatbacking my way at a place called The Velvet Pillow, and though the money was good, things got ugly with my pimp." She hands him a shingle and a matching plastic spoon. "So I went to this friend of mine, Grids, to see if he could help, and we struck a deal. He set me up with this place; I do art for him as payback."

Sly sits, scooping up a heap of the spicy beans-and-rice mixture.

"But art doesn't pay for this place, and it doesn't buy food. So I pick up packages as well, transport goods through the wormholes. Anyone with the code to my netbox can hire me. In fact, when I ran into you, I was on my way to pick up a package. Somebody the Quacks wanted moved quietly." She shrugs. "But most of the time I do art."

She steps to the workstation, motioning for him to join her. "A week after I got here, Grids started to bring this stuff down, piece by piece until I had the whole rig. It took me another couple of months before I learned how to use it. Maybe someday I'll be good enough to make a living at it. Here, let me show you." She powers on the holopad.

As he stands and approaches the workstation, Rose puts her hand into the flexglove, and a holograph materializes above the pad. Cubed, golden holographix spell out the words, "Masterfield Hologeneration Systems." The food is warming his stomach.

"After Grids showed me how to use the holopad, it was up to me and the manuals to decipher the Sephacume rig. It can do a lot more than build retroviruses, which is all I use it for." As she moves her hand in the flexglove, the holographix animate and reshape. The color becomes a dark cobalt, and the words form cylinders. The image solidifies as a blue-black set of spires twisting into a double helix that towers above a miniature city.

Sly has seen this before. "What is that?" he says, losing his balance. He grabs for the edge of the table and nearly drops the shingle.

Rose turns to him. "It's the Helix, the GenetiSource building. What's wrong?"

"I'm okay," he says, setting the shingle of food down on a corner of the workplatform. No longer hungry.

Her gaze is uncertain, but she continues. "I'm a Biostit," she says, putting the stress on *tist*. "I make images with the holopad and download them into the gene-fusion rig." She points to the off-white box plastered with picto instructions. "The Sephacume genecodes the sequences, builds the RNA base by base, purifies it, and packages it all into a retrovirus vector. The retro infect certain cells in the brain and insert the genetic info that codes for the visuals that I've created. I set it up so that different images will be brought to mind depending upon the hormonal levels of the recipient."

"You mean you put these holos in people's heads, and when they feel a certain way, that image comes to mind?"

She nods, says, "Just like memories, except that I can code the intensity and time span that the memories will

be active." She moves her hand in the flexglove. The Helix image languishes into a dark cloud that sweeps into a bird of crimson fire and finally comes to rest as a small boy, laughing. "This is a sentimental sequence I'm doing for that friend, Grids. This is him as a child."

"What's the story on this boyo, Grids?"

She pulls her hand and turns away from the holopad. "Rumor tells that he was the sharpest cutting hacker in the private sector before he got involved in the pull down of the old GenetiSource monolith. He can still cut with the best when he's sober." She waves her hand in a slow arc. "He hacked through the security, rerouted the power for this place and wiped it from the city's system in less than a day. Like I said, to the datanets, this place is invisible. Of course I can't have a vid, but I get along with payvids if I need to call someone."

Sly remembers the steel-blue helix, asks, "What happened with GenetiSource?"

"Before our time, 'squeak, GenetiSource was the biggest monolith in the world. The way I work it, Grids was pulled into a scam by some friends of his who needed a gloveman with more balls than brains to hack for them. The rest of them had all been blacklisted and screwed over by GenetiSource at some time or other, so they united to steal all of the private information in the GS files and spread it across all the nets. They succeeded in the end, but it cost them."

"And this Grids boyo was in on it?"

"Yeah. Rumor says that he got burned during the hacking run on GenetiSource, by an AI or ROMANN construct or something else—"

"ROMANN?" The word brings an itch to Sly's brain.

"ROM-based Artificial Neural Network. Learned about them from the Sephacume manuals."

She stops to take a bite of food. "Grids lost some friends in the end," she continues, "and betrayed his love. She never forgave him, and he's boozed since. Now people don't think he's much. I know he can still burn if the flame's lit for him, but the rest is maybe just rumors and drunken ramblings." She shovels down another mouthful of food, hardly chewing.

"Here, I'll show you something." She walks over to the holopad and presses her hand into the glove. "I'm almost done with the image of the fem he was heartfelt about—the one he betrayed." And as she flexes her hand, the holographix melt and shift from the boy-child into that of a fem—sweet face beneath long, auburn hair, and a clean white smile that is attractive, beautiful. But the features that hold Sly's gaze and make him gasp for breath are her eyes—her slate-gray, bottom-feeder eyes.

Sly feels himself drop into a battle crouch, his hands clenching and releasing as the memory of a monster-strength grip on his throat surges in his head. He takes deep breath and says, quiet and harsh, "Joella."

Rose turns. "What?"

"Deadwise."

In his sleep, a memory comes.

The stolen sequence floats on the blackout fringe just out of reach. He stretches toward it, kicking with his legs

as it fluxes, wavers on the fringe and slides in a wide arc away from him. He struggles after it, a flailing cripple in the current.

A singular white point flutters into his awareness away rightwise, moving rapidly toward him. The sequence blurs, melting into the visceral, fluid horizon. Gone, as the wavering pinpoint overtakes him.

He stands in the large body again, holding his breath because of the piss smell and staring with contempt at an obese, old woman sagging over a small chair. She throws an empty whiskey bottle to the floor and glowers up at him, her face a varicose full moon, orange in the dim light.

"I've done it again, Jonesy," she says, looking down between her legs at the spreading wetness on her skirt.

The smell of fresh urine blends with that of the old as he summons the courage he needs. He remembers the face of his father in jail the day before he was murdered. He thinks about the genelocked file that Dad had left for him, remembers the list of GenetiSource elite who were responsible for his father's framing and murder.

He remembers every name on the list, crossed off one by one until only two remained.

Kicking greasy Chinese take-out cartons across the floor, he walks past the obese crone, smiles at her when she looks afraid. "It's going to be all right," he says.

Her face relaxes, and he is thinking that his task will soon be finished. After this visit, his revenge will be nearly complete. He circles behind her and leans down to whisper in her ear. "I'm sorry, Mother," he says, lifting the pistol from his belt. Tears streak down his cheeks, and he curses himself for the tenderness he feels. He can't afford it. Not now. He grits his teeth and puts the weapon to her head as he thinks of the second-to-the-last person on the list. It's the one name he couldn't bring himself to believe.

"This is for Dad, Mother."

She turns, and her face registers first recognition and surprise, but after a second, calm resignation settles on her features.

"I always wondered why you kept your affection from me," she says, her voice suddenly strong. "I thought he might have told you, but that was a long time ago and you must understand the circumstances. I had no choice."

"I understand," he says. "I understand and can't forgive you." He winces as her head explodes.

As he leaves, he mentally crosses another name off the list. Only one remains—a boy who is healthy and alive even though he lacks a body, a boy by the name of Phoenix Brisbane.

And the sequence returns—a haunting, spectral vapor fluttering like a shredded cloud through his awareness. Its letters and numbers solidify until he can almost make them out. Then they twist and writhe, forming hard icicles, accelerating into the cobalt sky and spiraling out of his vision.

"Sly," she sings softly. "Sly."

He listens to her song and rolls in the flake to see Rose sitting cross-legged on the bed next to him.

She reaches out to wipe the sweat from his forehead. "It's only a night terror," she says. "Your parents?"

He feels a twist of guilt. "Not parents," he says, "not my parents." And not wanting to remember the dream, he adds, "A sequence."

"What sequence?"

"When Deadwise did the slice on Jonesy, the last thing to go through his head was a sequence—a long series of letters each followed by a series of ones and zeros. I figured the binary ends, but the rest means nothing."

Rose's face goes tight. "Sounds like hacker work to me. I'll contact Grids. Maybe he can figure this sequence as well as get Deadwise off our tail."

She pulls some bedding close over him and curls in tight, gently stroking his fuzzy head and humming softly until he falls asleep. He dreams again, of his father this time, pulling him from the broken snowblade and carrying him home.

Their journey to see Grids passes like slow fog. They wind through wormholes in complete silence, complete darkness, and waist deep in sludge and salt water.

Sly is thankful that they hold hands even though Rose has said that the Zombies are largely a myth, and it's unlikely that Deadwise can track them with the tide so high. So they trudge on, his ears straining for the telltale sounds of movement that would spell Deadwise. His feet have completely healed, and although he is still walking without shoes, he feels strong.

It's almost twilight when they finally hit surface. Brown dust and low clouds filter and diffuse most of the remaining daylight. They climb into an alley canyon that smells like rotting food and human waste, but it's refreshing compared to the wormhole. A weak streetlamp on the corner struggles to hold back the shadows.

Sly pulls himself up into a wary stance and looks around, only to find that they are surrounded by a group of heavy boyos. He falls into a battle crouch and prepares to either run or fight, looking to Rose for his cue.

Rose stands up full height and calls out, "We've come to see Grids."

One of the gang steps forward, tall and black, a small gemstone imbedded in his front tooth. The others circle around behind them. "Rose," he says.

She nods, "Diamond Man."

Behind him another boyo is sand-stenciling the words "Ozone Freestyle" deep into the building's surface.

"Rose, what's wit' da brat?" All Sly can see is teeth and the whites of his eyes.

Brat he thinks, standing up full height and pushing his chest out. This boyo isn't much older than me.

"He's a friend," she says, grabbing Sly's hand. "Grids wants to see him."

"Gloveman tol' us y' called. He staggerin' in a bad way." Diamond Man shrugs. "But he home if you wan' him."

"We do." Rose turns and pulls Sly through the circle and up some metal stairs that hang on the outside of a brown brick building. They climb to the first floor and enter.

When Sly looks anxiously over his shoulder into the alley, he sees nothing. The boys are gone. "Rose?" he asks softly, motioning toward the alley behind them.

"That was Ozone Freestyle," she says without looking. "A gang of muscle that works with Grids." The hall inside smells worse than the alley—of cheap alcohol and stale urine. She leads him up some more stairs. "When Grids came here to the Nui-tang district, Ozone Freestyle was barely scraping out an existence. As a muscle gang, they were low on the power rung. Well, Grids needed protection, so he got this idea to hook up with Ozone Freestyle's head boyo, Chop Chop, and cut a deal—protection for information."

They come to a thick metal door, its frame reinforced with kevlar-lignin fibermesh. There is a small vidscreen just left of it. A thought shuffles unbidden into Sly's mind as he examines the screen and the locking mechanisms it controls. It would take three minutes to break it, he thinks, with a mirror, a circuit shunt or two, and some acid paste. He'd be in with plenty of time to take out the interior alarm before anyone noticed. Just like the job he did for Phoenix at the Ivory Tower, he thinks. Except this would be less dangerous because that ice-packed bitch doesn't live here.

Rose is still speaking when his mind returns to the corridor and the smell. "Well, Grids and Chop Chop managed to boost Ozone Freestyle to the level of a major underworld power. What's better: they'll do whatever Grids asks so long as he's sober. Probably watching us now through the infrascope." She points to a black-glass fisheye above the door, presses the screen and smiles into it, saying, "Hi, Grids. We made it."

There is a sound of sliding, magnetic bolts, and Rose pulls Sly back. As the door swings out, they are enveloped in a cloud of incense smoke. It lays a thick covering to the hall's stench, without eliminating it. They step into the room, and the door swings to a close behind them. The bolts click back into place.

Grids's squat is large and cluttered with an almost organic compost of optoelectronics. The guts of vidphones and holopads, some of them not too old, are strewn like the aftermath of a massacre. Amid the clutter are vestiges of old, carbonflake furniture. There is a kitchen area in one corner and a separate toilet room, but electronic junk and organic garbage pervades. Only one area is trash-free—the computer and holopad in the center of the room.

Sly winds his way to the console, detailing the vintage Masterfield holoplatform and the Hyro-Kurckel generators. It is all very impressive. Pity everything is smeared with dust. As he sweeps around the equipment, his appreciation grows, seeing the custom flexgloves that bespeak a tandem interface—dreamtime to all but the most serious hackers.

"An' jus' what do we 'ave here?"

Sly feels his respect for the gloveman slide into the floor even before he can see him. The slur tells the tale of a heavy dependence on alcohol.

When he turns to look, it goes from bad to worse.

The man who stands before him is young, probably no

more than thirty, but there are deep lines and creases in his face which tell of a life on the edge—the edge that evidently Jonesy had ridden. Sly has visions of dark cubicles of loneliness, along with memories of hot, scratchy liquid in his throat, thickening and drying the lining of his mouth until it feels cotton and foreign. The man before him fits those memories. He is filthy, with the kind of dirt which only comes from extended neglect.

The wrinkles widen as the man swings his gaze, slow and long, to focus on Sly. "An' jus' who the hell is this, Rose? You an' me, we had a deal, no strangers." He sways toward a semi-clean chair, and Rose moves to help him.

"Grids, this is Sly. I told you about him on the vid. You said to bring him, 'member?"

The man looks at her as if she isn't there and swings his head toward Sly, bobbing like a marionette.

Sly turns his disgust back to the console. The odds of successfully operating it himself pop into his head—about twenty percent, considering his hands won't fit the custom gloves. Still, if he were to confine himself strictly to the console, things would be forced and jerky, but it might improve his odds of doing something with the code in his head. At least he might be able to find out what it is. He spins back to face the pair. "Rose, this boyo is hardline goners—"

Rose stands and stops him with an icy stare. Then she pulls an autoinjector from her pocket and jabs it into Grids's forearm. A gentle hiss fills the room as the drug is pushed into his veins.

Grids's head lolls back onto the flake of the chair, muttering.

Rose looks to Sly. "Get cluewise, kid. Grids is the only hope you've got. Just keep your yapper closed or he may put you back on the street and give Deadwise your address."

"Rose . . ." From Grids, a whisper.

She stoops beside him, says, "What can I get you?"

His voice is weak. "Let the boy alone. He only knows what he sees."

Memories, Sly's own now, of his stuffed bear and the words of his father, hit him hardline.

Rose helps Grids stand and wipes the sweat from his brow. The drug is working. "So you're the boyo that Rose says is in a pile of trouble with a certain Joella we all know and love." His voice is stronger now, but when he mentions Deadwise, it fills with pain. He takes the towel from Rose and walks to face Sly, his eyes brighter now. "Do you understand just what trouble you've happened into, Slyboy?"

Sly shakes his head.

Grids wipes his forehead and sighs. "This Deadwise," he says, "she's the best there ever was, maybe ever will be. The icepack she's got isn't even on the market yet, and she was done over ten years ago." He walks slowly, but steadily toward the commlink near the computer. "You see," he says, turning to look at Sly again, "there is no more proficient bender in the business than my Joella." Only the slightest hint of pain that time.

Grids hits the stud on the commlink. "Chop Chop. Grids. There might be trouble blowin' our way—an ice-

packed fem. If so, warn me, then get out of the way. Understand?"

"Done," comes the reply.

"If it's anything else," Grids continues, "standard execution." He turns and strides back to the console, his step solid, and faces Sly. "What worries me is Joella hasn't been in the business for the last seven years, at least not personally. She got into the GenetiSource pulldown because they killed her boy in some sort of personality transfer operation. Once that was over . . . once everything was over, she became a hermit of sorts. She hasn't been seen outside her Ivory Tower in nearly four years."

At the words *Ivory Tower*, Sly feels the muscles in his neck tighten. He scans for exits. "Ivory Tower," he says, trying to calm himself. "That's where the man in my head got the sequence."

Grids grazes him with a chill look, continues, "So if indeed she is handling this up close and personal, then things are seriously out of control." He slides into the foamflake chair of the console and starts flicking switches to power up the rig. A bass hum fills the rooms as the Hyro-Kurckel generators rumble to life.

Rose moves up behind him to watch, beaming a look of vindicated triumph toward Sly.

"Well, let's get The Luck's view of things," Grids says, blowing some of the dust off the holopads. "Come on, China Luck, talk to me."

Let's see what this gloveman can do, thinks Sly, stepping in close to get a good view. The space around them fills with the blackness of a closed-circuit library, and as Sly is trying to fathom an inhouse system of such size, a voice comes over the speakers.

"B-B-Been a l-l-long time, Grids. H-H-How you doin'?"

Grids smiles, and for the first time since they entered the squat, Sly allows himself to feel some semblance of hope. On that smile alone he is willing to add ten percent to his chances of making it through this intact. As Grids pushes his hands into the flexgloves, it goes up another five.

"Yeah, it has been a long time, my friend. I've got a prime amount of urgency rollin' here. I'll need a hypnotic pattern called up as soon as yesterday. Also, I'll be inputting an unknown sequence. I want a library scan on it, and a Swissnet run ready as backup."

The holographix swirl around them. The blackness becomes brown and forms into a kangaroo. Grids is talking to it. "Here is the situation: Joella is back on the scene. She is after a boyo with a code in his head—"

"Then s-she will g-g-get him. I have con-f-f-firmed a ninety-eight percent f-f-fatalty given any type boyo." A gray elephant with off-white tusks takes form behind the kangaroo, and flat datafields grow underneath them. "I've s-s-set up available d-d-data, and I need more specifics to refine the p-p-percentage, but either w-w-way your boyo is near death."

"I know, I know, but if she has come out of the Ivory Tower, and this info is so important, maybe we can just give it to her in exchange for the boy's life, at least until we can think up something more . . . lasting."

"O-k-k-kay, Grids, I'll set up an inhouse scan, b-b-but

let me warn you; The Bird has been n-n-nesting all over your s-s-system for the last couple of days. If we d-d-d have to shoot into the Swissnet or any other d-d-dantern for that matter, any p-p-private online time is going to be brief."

"What else is new? Any openings at all?"

"D-D-Damn Birdboy has been on me like a cheap s-s-suit and a bad haircut. I haven't b-b-been able to breathe for running into s-s-some trap he's constructed."

"So what your telling me is that there are no openings at all?"

"N-N-Not anywhere near h-h-here, I c-c-can set up a remote relay disguised as b-b-bulk junk mail, but even so, it would only g-g-get us seven s-s-seconds."

"It'll be enough. Do it, and prepare for that inhouse library scan."

Sly moves toward Rose as Grids and China Luck, or whatever his name is, set up the system to decode the sequence. "This Luck boyo," he says to Rose. "What's the word?"

Rose turns her attention from Grids's back to look at Sly. "No boyo. Online ROMANN construct, class five AI. State-of-the-art when Grids did the hardwiring." Rose gives herself a contented smile.

Sly looks back to Grids bustling at the console, a broad grin on the man's face, his hands dancing in the flexgloves as holographix rock and shift around him. "What's with the stutter?"

"Grids said it didn't come like that," she answered, "but The Bird damaged it years ago as payback for some sneaky dead on The Luck's part."

Sly looks and tries to follow what's happening with Grids, but he's moving too fast. "And this Bird?"

Rose sounds annoyed, "I don't know." She turns back to watch Grids.

But the gloveman is finished and cuts in. "The Bird, as The Luck likes to call him, is something of a . . . ah . . . a demon, if you will—an anomaly I ran across a long time ago." Something catches his attention in the holographix and he turns away from them, back to work, molding and shaping the program with broad, sweeping hand motions.

"When I found The Bird," he continues, "he didn't even know what he was. He thought he was a boy with a body, living in New York." Grids laughs.

From somewhere deep in Sly, he realizes that he's heard some of this before.

"He really was a boy once. In fact, he was the heir to the GenetiSource empire, but he was murdered, and his brain was put into permanent stasis and hardwired to a reality generator. The whole setup was isolated from the datanets until we broke into GenetiSource to wire an interface linkup. That was during the takedown. GenetiSource had isolated their private network from all the others, physically removed any connections so that all the most important data would be safe from hackers. It's the most effective security possible."

"Joella had to break into the GenetiSource headquarters and wire in an interface directly. When she'd finished, I cut them up from the inside." The smile disappears

from Grids's face. "I found The Bird in there, lost and alone. I thought I could shape him, use him, teach him to be what I envisioned he could be, but he learned much faster than I expected, and by the time I realized my mistake, he had already screwed me blind, tricked me into betraying someone I cared . . ." He falters, pain evident in his voice. ". . . I care about deeply. He made me do things I'll forever regret."

A vision comes to Sly's mind of a scarred face framed by short auburn hair.

"Well, by then he was already loose and there was nothing I could do to stop him." His hands slow. "Ever since that day, the little bastard has dogged me, and I haven't been able to make any major moves in any of the important nets without having to pull myself offline whenever he comes near."

Grids pulls his hands from the gloves and looks at Sly. "Come on, let's see if we can't still put one over on Birdboy."

Sly looks at the display. As bits of information swirl and dance, the flux and flow of holographix blend into a kaleidoscope of color. He hears Grids warn Rose not to watch the console, and some internal part of him fights for control, fights not to look, but it's too late. The ebb and tide of a hypnotic, holographic wave surge around and through him, and he feels himself fall. Then someone is helping him sit, putting an autoinjector into his arm. In the distance, he hears a faint hiss and his head lolls forward onto his chest.

The sequence rushes toward him like the redwoods on Sleeper's Run, and, as the letters speed past like the cars of a bullet train, he can read each one clearly, easily. Lines of letters and numbers hiss around him, snakes of double-edged information in the shifting, holographic panorama. Sly hears himself speaking, but the voice isn't his. The intonation is deep, older.

Sly wakes in waves as the holographix solidify around him. He hears voices, and feels the girl holding his hand.

"It's got two p-p-parts," says a kangaroo in a forest of twisting, writhing, single-stranded RNA. "The l-l-letters are a direct c-c-coding sequence for an anomalistic r-r-retrovirus. I c-c-can't find any inhouse h-h-homologies to known retros."

"A retro sequence?" Grids asks, easing Sly from the chair. "What's the other part?"

"The end is a binary c-c-code. The l-l-library has nothing on it either, b-b-but it looks like an elab-b-borate access key."

Grids pushes forward toward the console, swinging the chair's servos as his hands detail everything he's saying. "How much time did you say we have online before we're buzzed by The Bird?"

"Seven s-s-seconds."

"Okay, cut the sequence into its two parts. We'll punch into Swissnet and quickscan the sheets for a match to the binary keycode, but even though Birdboy won't expect us to use a highbrow datanet, we can't spend too much time on it. You know what The Bird can do if he catches us out there."

The Luck's voice grows small. "Y-Y-Yes, I do."

"So it'll have to be a strict data snatch. We'll analyze everything after the run."

"That'll still b-b-be cutting it c-c-close."

"Just set up the relay, and if you don't waste time out in the open, we'll be solid. Let me know when everything is ready." The gloveman's hands become a blur of fabrication as pieces of holographic data detach themselves from one another and realign to create a new whole. "Boyo," he says, "you ever do any hacking?"

Visions of the tusked elephant symbol—gray against the white stone of the Ivory Tower—rush his thoughts, but Sly answers, almost too slowly, "No, sir."

Rose eyes him, but Grids doesn't seem to notice.

"Well, what I'm doing is fashioning an information-extraction program." His flexgloves twist and squirm as a black spike forms, thin and sharp, above the holopad. Its tip is a gleaming silver needle. "The spike is the holopad's way of representing the extraction program. The silver tip is the binary code you gave us."

Sly's neck tightens, and his eyes rivet themselves to the flow of images.

The Luck comes back online. "R-R-Relay set up complete, ready and w-w-willing when you are, G-G-Grids."

"Good. I want you to pull the RNA part of the sequence out of memory. If something goes wrong, I don't want The Bird to get everything, just in case it turns out to be valuable."

Sly balances on the balls of his feet. Anticipation and dark glee raise the hackles on his back as he absently rubs his hands together. Something important is happening—something he's been waiting a long time for.

"R-R-Ready to download."

Grids turns to them. "Here we go." He smiles, old and wise. "It's been ages since I've had this much fun." He pulls an optocard from under the table. The card shimmers silver and reflects a rainbow in the glimmering light of the holopad. Grids feeds it into the console. "Download," he says.

"Complete. I'll erase all other c-c-copies in memory."

"Give me manual control of the drive."

"Ok-k-kay. Just press the stud t-t-to reload."

Sly sees the button over the optocard slot—a silent red beacon on the face of the ebony-black holopad. Red on black are the colors of a snowblade the boy always wanted for Christmas but never got.

"Okay, enough teasing," Grids says. "Let's get down to it." Then his hands are carving holographs again. "Luck," he says, his voice low and steady, "the run is laid in Counting down. Three. Two. One. Now!"

The extraction program flies—a chrome-tipped needle pulsing through the light of the fiberoptic tunnel. It blasts over an endless field of identical gravestones, guided by the silver coding, and plunges deep into the heart of a tomb, piercing it with binary precision.

The wound bleeds crimson, and the needle sucks it up. Not a drop is lost. The needle flexes and slingshots back through a glowing, fiberoptic tunnel and into a shower of sparks.

The sparks are real, accompanied by a screeching crackle and the smell of burning circuitry.

Sly lunges to the side and rolls forward into a crouch as the console cartridge fries.

Rose ducks, but remains behind Grids.

The gloveman howls, yanking his hands from the gloves and slapping shutoffs as fast as he can. The smell of burning flesh joins that of incense and fried circuits. He jams his fingers into his mouth, reaching down with the other hand to open a small compartment under the chair that contains a dozen or so replacement circuits.

As he grabs a fresh cartridge, the intercom crackles. "Grids. Dis Chop Chop. All straight up?"

The gloveman snatches the blackened cartridge from its slot, its Masterfield logo melted and dripping. He slaps in the new one, pulls his fingers out of his mouth, and calls over his shoulder, "Diccy, but stable. Just keep sharp."

"Done."

"China Luck, come on. Speak to me. What's up, friend? You still online?"

The Luck roars, glee in his voice overriding the stutter. "F'en hellbent, you should have seen it—that stupid Birdboy, caught with his pants down and playing with himself."

Grids smiles, but his tone is harsh. "Luck, calm down. Get us offline and tell me what happened."

"Had his back to us. By the t-t-time he realized he couldn't b-b-e everywhere at once, I had d-d-done an interp on the code and was already b-b-back. He fried the c-c-cartridge after the fact."

"We're still showing a reflection in the net, Luck. Take us offline now!" His hands plunge into the flexgloves and begin to dance. The holographic spike drains of color and fades.

"I'm t-t-taking us off—"

A rumbling hiss fills the room, coming from the bank of speakers. A voice seeps out like death as a child, high-pitched and ugly. "Shut up, you tiresome toy." The holographix bubble dark oil, flooding the forest and drowning the small kangaroo. When the marsupial is completely immersed in black sludge, the oil freezes and begins to crack.

Sly moves for a closer look, and a quivering chill passes through his chest. Recognition and hatred fill him, but in the forefront of his head there is a sense that things have moved just one step closer to completion.

Grids yanks his hands out of the gloves and leans back. "Well, well, long time no see, BirdBoy. You should drop by more often."

The oil splits completely, shards crumbling to reveal a huge ball of red fire. The ball grows wings and a spine-studded tail of blazing poison. "Your attempts at bravado are almost as pathetic as the antics of that antiquated pile of circuits that you keep to do your dirty work."

Grids coughs politely. "Get to the point, you spoiled brat." His tone is dry, caustic. "I have no time to listen to arrogant insults from someone who doesn't even have arms and legs. Just what do you want?"

The hiss rises in volume, and the voice thunders, "You have something of mine, mortal, and I want it. I have easily acquired the binary key from pathetic little China

Luck, but there is a part missing. Since you have the binary, then you must also have the RNA sequence. Grids, it belongs to me!"

Grids flashes a glance to the blinking red button, then looks to Sly, his eyebrows arched. He turns back to the hovering bird of flame. "Well, let's see here, Phoenix. Ah, nope, I don't see the word 'BirdBoy' anywhere on it, so I guess it's not yours."

Silence. Nothing but the hovering phoenix, flickering. He speaks again, but the voice is different now—evenly pitched, reasonable. "Grids, listen. The sequence contains information vital to the success of a personality transfer procedure that my uncle developed when he was president of GenetiSource, a couple of years before your icepacked bitch killed him. She took that code from him, locked it away, and erased any trace of it from inside."

Sly looks from Grids to the girl, but she is watching the holographix. He glances around and his eyes land home on the button, winking red on the Masterfield holopad, waiting to fill memory with the contents of the optocard—with the second half of the sequence.

"I got Jonesy Ripka to steal it from that cyborg whore. As advance payment I even gave him a highly sophisticated set of self-splicing genes designed to aid healing. But the bitch got to him before I could have him picked up. That's when things got a little tight. Arranging for the boyo's accident was nearly as easy as paying off the doctor, though it was a miracle that your blind and stupid little Maleficent actually managed to retrieve the package I sent her to get. Especially after he'd escaped with the death of the doctor. And considering the boy's determination, it was a long shot I'd get to the code before the bitch did. But as you can see, sometimes the gods smile."

The flaming bird droops and wavers until his fire is faint. His voice changes again, taking on a distant whine, pleading. "Grids, listen to me. Give me the retro sequence, and within two weeks you won't ever have to worry about me again. I'll be back in a body where I belong and out of your way. What do you say?"

Blink. The light on the holopad beckons to Sly.

Grids steeples his hands and sinks farther into the foamflake, his brow furrowing. "Birdboy, why would you hop into a body where you'd be vulnerable, when you could stay where you are, and be the most powerful little prig on the planet?"

The flamewing splits and falls, forming the face of a small, crying child. "How could you know what it's like?" he said. "There's nothing in here but cold, barren data. There's no warmth, no one to hold me, no one to talk to." The child looks up and wipes the tears from his face. "All I want is to be a little boy again, to feel my arms and legs. I want to eat and sleep again. I've almost forgotten what it's like to feel anything . . . except disappointed and lonely."

"So," Grids says, "if I give you the code you'll be out of the datanets forever?"

"Forever."

Blink. The retrovirus sequence waits on the optocard.

Savage glee fills Sly as he watches the flashing button, and a picture comes to him of his mother. She is huge and deteriorating still, but now she has the face of young Phoenix. There is no hesitation this time as he puts the pistol to his head and squeezes the trigger, giggling as the cherubic face explodes.

Grids is pondering. "All right, Birdboy, get The Luck back online."

"Okay, but—"

"You want an answer or not?"

The holographic boy becomes a phoenix again, says, "Whatever you say."

Blink.

Below the bird appears a small kangaroo in mid-hop. "... d-d-does is g-g-give the ..." Realization hits. "Oh."

"Luck, Birdboy has offered to leave all the datanets for good if we give him the code. What do you say?"

"W-W-What about Joella and the b-b-boy? We were doing this t-t-to get him out of his mess—"

Phoenix cuts him off, speaking with confidence. "Listen, if it's the boyo you're worried about, once you give me the sequence, the bitch won't have any reason to hunt him. She'll be too worried about tracking me down."

Grids turns to Sly. "What do you say, Slyboy? Do we make a deal with the devil or no?"

Sly wrenches his eyes from the flashing light on the holopad and looks to Rose, a broad smile forming on his lips. "Whatever it takes to get Deadwise off our tails." Then he faces Grids again. "And it sounds as though I'd be doing you a favor as well."

"More than you could ever know." Grids turns back to the console. "All right, Birdboy, I want some compensation."

"Naturally. Name it."

Grids looks back at Sly, then at Rose. "First, I'll need two uncoded false passports, for a boy of around thirteen and a fem of fifteen or so. Then I want a million credits put into a genelocked account under those two passports' ID prints, so you can't jerk the money back after you get what you want."

"It's done."

The pictoprinter coughs and rumbles. Two passports and two opticards with "Sadiate Bank of Zurich" emblazoned on the side in forest-green pictographix emerge from the slot and fall to the bin below.

Grids gives Sly a wink.

Sly feels his hands clench, the bite of his nails digging deep into his palms. It's really happening.

"Also," says Grids, "I want you to secure a privileged account on one of the orbital nodes and let me code the passkey."

"A privileged account?"

"System-level access at least. It seems such a modest price for freedom."

"Okay, you've made your meaning. It's set up. I've given China Luck the coordinates. Code at your leisure."

"I will later, when you're out. Meanwhile, prepare to receive the code." Grids leans forward.

Yes, thinks Sly, now is the time.

The gloveman's hand is in motion toward the button

when it is stopped by an ear-splitting shriek of rending metal from the door behind them.

Into the following calm, the voice drops like liquid fire. "Grids, please don't make me kill you."

The muscles in the gloveman's back bunch up, but he turns slow and easy, his hands spread wide.

Sly feels a chill slice up his neck to make his hair stand on end. His head begins to throb, and he turns, dropping to a crouch, to see her standing in the ruined doorway—the V-cut splattered with muck. A thin spray of blood is traced across her features, mixed with sweat, and streaming along the fine, scar lines on her face. Blood and sewage stain her battlesuit so that Sly can barely make out the tusked elephant symbol on her chest.

She is poised in easy readiness on the balls of her feet, arms at her sides, her right hand dripping with vermillion gore.

Sly peeps hints of gridded robotics, exposed icepack, beneath the flayed skin. As she moves slightly, the flesh slips farther and he sees it clearly—a milky-white mesh of flex armoring beneath the seeping wound.

"Well, well, today must be a family reunion," Grids says, standing to face her. "If somebody'd told me, I would've had refreshments prepared."

A wistful smile pushes at the corners of her mouth. "This is a do-or-die, my love; please don't push me. You were about to do something out of your depth, as usual. Trust that I would rather kill even you than let you make this mistake."

Sly looks from her to the holopad's flashing button and back.

Her attention is focused on Grids.

Once more his eyes stray to the console.

Blink. The button beckons for his touch.

Teasing death just one more time, he thinks to himself, straightening slowly and not wanting to look toward the button—the button that means sweet revenge. Instead, he focuses on Deadwise.

She bares her teeth in a cat's smile. "I've spent seven years trying to keep Phoenix in check, and I'm not about to let you destroy that."

Grids looks stunned. "What are you talking about, Joella? He's loose in the datanets, free to inhabit any online system, steal any public and most private information and manipulate it to his heart's content. How have you been keeping him in check?"

The grin fades and her tone becomes soft, out of place with the face. "Grids, for years I've watched him use the power you gave him to manipulate the corporate monoliths with precision; acquiring stock, crashing files, selling any and all information. He's been buying bodies from killers like Jonesy for years, even though I don't see how Jonesy could have worked for him after what happened. Phoenix was a big part of the GenetiSource plan to get rid of Jonesy's father by framing, and later murdering, him."

She focuses her attention on Grids alone. "All this time, Phoenix has been waiting for the right moment, watching, pushing buttons, until the climate is right. He's been after that code all along, because when he gets a

body, everything will be set up to make him, overnight, the most powerful person in the world."

Grids sits on the edge of a chair and looks down, thinking.

Desperate frustration fills Sly. F'en lame gloveman is being convinced! Can't wait for him. It's time to take matters in hand. He flashes a glance at the button and starts to edge toward the holopad.

Blink.

He shifts his weight onto his left foot and leans ever so slightly in the direction of the button.

Grids shakes his head. "That still doesn't make sense. He's already the most powerful person in the world. He runs rampant through the lines. Nobody can stop him. Even I can only fake him out for brief spurts. If he gets a body, then it's just like he says, you'll try and take him out, and I've never known you to fail, Joella."

Blink. A little farther.

"Grids, think about it. All he controls now is information. It's power, but he has no real way to benefit from it. If he gets a body, not only will he manipulate all that information, he will have the hands and feet to physically put that information into action. He can come out as anyone at anytime. If that happened, everyone in this room would be taken out sooner or later. Even I would only stay alive for a short duration under the onslaught that he could bring to bear, unless I was lucky enough to find him in time."

Sweat beads on Sly's brow as a timeless centimeter crawls under his foot.

Deadwise glances down, bone-weary written on her face. "And that's not all. The sequence that Jonesy stole allows one personality to be mapped over another, but it doesn't completely kill the victim. It just pushes him into the background. That's how GenetiSource drove my son insane. I swore I'd never let it happen to anyone else. The only way I can be sure is by guarding the information, keeping it secret. Phoenix could use the sequence to map himself or any of his demented henchmen over the minds of as many people as he wanted. Besides . . ." She holds up the ruination of her right hand, and the blood changes direction, running over her forearm to her elbow. "I've slowed, Grids. One of your boyos did this to me, and I don't even think he was jacked up."

Grids gasps, spins to the commlink. "Chop Chop?"

A new voice enters the room. "Chop Chop restin' with the Fin, Grids. Dis Diamon' Man."

Grids chokes, and his face goes pale.

"Gloveman, I gots twenty killjoys, ready to back you up. Jus' say da word and we rumble like thunder."

Sly looks up. Deadwise is poised in perfect, stationary balance.

Blink. Jus a little farther and he'll be in reach.

A tear glides down Grids's cheek. "Hold off, Diamond Man," he says. "I'll cope."

"Icepack!" It's Phoenix, flaming brightly in bird form above the holopad.

"Go away, you infantile megalomaniac." Her lips barely seem to move. She lowers her hand, and the drip of gore reverses, slipping to the floor again.

"Icepack," says the demon-child, "think about it. Give me a body, and you'd have at least a week to try and kill me. As is, you can never touch me, can never get those fine strong hands of yours around my throat."

"Trust me, it's an image I fall asleep to. But I'd rather know where you are, so I think you should stay put."

Blink.

Nearly there.

Blink.

One more step and . . .

"Boy!"

Sly feels his blood freeze.

"There is an eighty-nine-percent chance that I can kill you long before you hit that button. I don't kill children, but believe that I will make this exception if I have to."

Sly begins to tremble, but keeps a grip on his nerve and answers cool as he can. "Yeah, Deadwise, but there's sixty-percent odds that my body keeps right on going and presses the button anyway. The little son of a bitch must come out."

Rose gives him a wide-eyed stare.

Deadwise whispers, "Jonesy."

Grids cuts in. "Sly, you're a sharp boyo. This isn't worth dying over. Just back off the button, and we'll get all of this settled."

Blink. Sly feels a small, insane laugh bubble up. "Oh, that's easy for you to say. She hasn't broken your neck recently."

From the speakers comes a satisfied rumble.

Blink. Sly continues, "She couldn't let me live anyway; I have the code. No matter where I go or what I say I'll do, she'll know I have the means of her downfall in my head. I'm going to keep my bargain with the devil."

"Sly, don't," from the girl.

Deadwise says, "The boy's overshadowed. When Grids pulled the code from him, Jonesy got on top."

Blink. Sly keeps his mind focused on the button, trying to disregard the cry of panic from the small boy in the back of his brain. It's Jonesy's voice that speaks. "You've got it right, you stupid bitch, and what's more, you're going to end up doing my work for me. All this time I've been trying to devise a way to get to the last of the people that betrayed my father, and the only way to succeed is to get him out and into a body were I can kill him. That's why I was willing to do his dirty work."

Blink. Sweat drips down Sly's neck.

"So now, you are going to kill me, but not before I let him out, and then you will have to kill him to stay alive. As it stands, I guess it really doesn't make that much difference, does it?"

Blink. As if from far away, Sly feels muscles, not under his control, jerk. Then he is jumping toward the holopad. In slow motion he sees his hand arc toward the button, its steady blinking growing ever brighter. This can't be happening, the small boy thinks. Promised he'd do slave-action for no one, ever again. His decisions were supposed to belong to him and him alone. Now, he's failing again.

Then fire races up his legs as the rounds hit, and he begins to collapse. But his fingers are almost there, tips

grazing the button—the button that means the death of Phoenix Brisbane, the last name on his list. He can feel the smooth texture of the glowing red glass as it flashes beneath his fingers, as he prepares to press it.

No! In the back of Sly's mind, a small boy yells, "NO." The hand wavers, fingers hesitate, and for an instant the boy is back on top.

Then Rose's waldo slams the breath from his body and throws him wide of the console.

He rolls over to see the mechanical arm above him coming down hard for a second time. It hits him in the chest and pins him to the floor.

His legs are on fire and he struggles to move. No luck; her waldo holds him strong.

Deadwise stands above him, one hand casually pushing the arm aside while the other blurs for a pocket.

Sly looks toward the console to see the button still blinking in relentless repetition. The code was never sent. He has failed at the end.

Deadwise has won.

Then the cyborg is all over him, the autoinjector sliding seamless into his thigh through the citysuit.

"Sleep, boy. When you wake, I promise, Jonesy will bother you no more."

He wakes from a dreamless sleep, flatbacked on a comfortable mattress. When he peeps, he knows where he is, washed up in Quackpalace again, though this time the accommodations are plush.

On the wall in front of him, a huge vidscreen tells softly of gang riots in the Nui-tang district downtown. The words "Ozone Freestyle" come up more than once. He turns away, not really interested, and thinks about his stuffed bear, but there isn't much longing for it.

To his left sits a small packet on a nightstand that looks like real oak, not synthetic. He reaches gingerly, pain streaking down his legs as he turns. Inside the packet is an optocard and a passport. He opens the passport and sees his face done in clear pictographix, and the name Andrew Morgan Ridgefield. He laughs at the picto of himself. He looks funny without hair.

The nurse comes in, same vidtoon voice in place, but now her lab coat displays the tusked elephant on the lapel. "And how are we doing today, Andrew?"

He smiles, remembering the million credits on the optocard, and says, "I guess I'm fine, just fine."

She pinches his nose and smiles back. "The doctor says that you're healing exceptionally well and should be able to take visitors. Your sister has been waiting most of the day. Do you feel up to seeing someone?"

"Yes."

As she leaves, Sly just keeps smiling.

When the bitzy face, lopsided with genuine diamond nose-rings, pops around the door frame, his smile stretches to a grin. She walks up to him, her blue hair shining clean in the light, and takes his hand in hers. "Pipsqueak," she says, "it's good to see you awake. Dad is at home, waiting for you to get better so we can go away for a while." He closes his eyes as she kisses him on the forehead.

Behind his eyes he expects to see the numbers and letters of the sequence, and when they don't come, a wave of relief passes through him. Wiped from his memory.

I don't care, he thinks, and concentrates instead on the cool wetness of Rose's lips on his brow and the secure grasp of her hand. ♦

Sir Harold and the Gnome King



by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

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Looking Forward:

Flare

by Roger Zelazny

and Thomas T. Thomas

Coming in September 1992 from Baen Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

In the world of 2081, humankind owned the Solar System, and we had broken it to our will . . . or so we thought. What everyone had forgotten was that Sol is a truly *variable* star.

Today, if the Sun were to generate a flare several times greater than any we have observed—and it is quite likely to do just that someday—it might interfere with television reception here on Earth: hardly a major disaster. But the story would be very different for people in an orbital station, or ferrying a trillion tons of natural gas in from Jupiter at a sizable fraction of the speed of light.

Flare, the latest collaboration from Zelazny and Thomas, is the story of just such an event. The opening of the book sets the scene with an essay on science that succeeds in being informative and suspenseful at the same time.

Concatenating Bangs

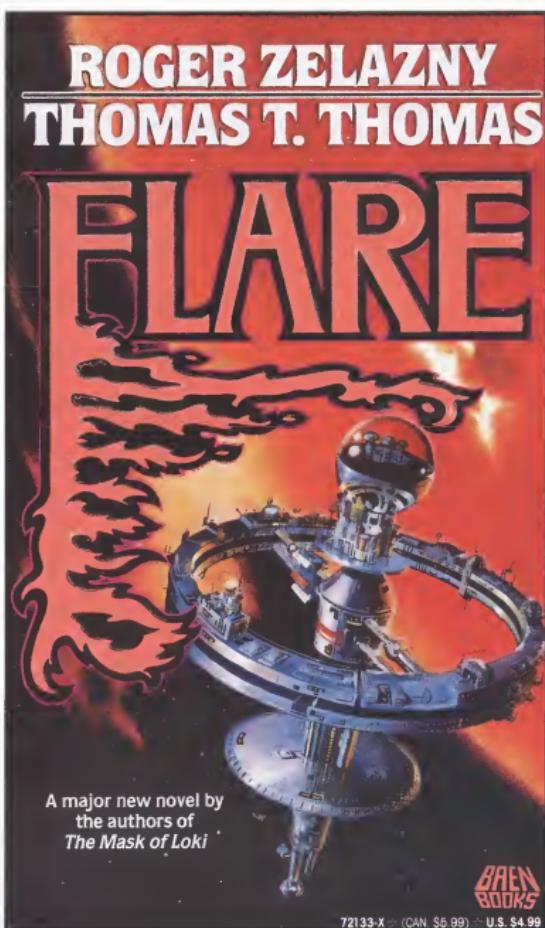
Ping!

Ping!

Ping!

Or whatever the sound might be when two hydrogen nuclei—in effect, a pair of stripped protons—collide repeatedly at pressures of two hundred billion atmospheres and temperatures of fifteen million degrees Kelvin.

Conditions of such pressure and temperature exist within the cores of G-type yellow stars. However, the scales for measuring them, expressed in “atmospheres” and “degrees,” only



have relevance to the temporary environmental stability of a small green planet which orbits at ninety-three million miles from the surface of such a star.

Ping!

Ping!

Ping!

Protons are tough little nuts, even under such extremes of temperature and pressure. Each one is welded together as a simple combination of quarks, which are various and not simple at all. Quarks are, depending on your point of view, either the building blocks of matter, or the slippery interface between matter and energy. Take your pick.

Because protons have a positive charge—a descriptive quality of matter that, again, only has relevance in an Earthside laboratory or an electronic circuit—and because particles having similar charges repel each other with a ferocity beyond all human understanding, the colliding protons immediately spring apart, unscathed.

In fact, any single proton must collide, on average, forty trillion trillion times with one of its associates before anything will happen. At the rate of one hundred million collisions per second, under the jostlings of extreme pressure and with the agitations of extreme temperature, one proton in the star's core will suffer a physical change once in fourteen billion years. On average. And fourteen billion years is three times longer than the star itself is likely to remain alive. So the average proton, loose in a star's core, can expect to lead a hectic but otherwise uneventful life. Such as it is.

Ping!

Ping!

Ping!

But once in forty trillion trillion times, a collision will fuse the two protons together. One of them sheds its charge with the release of a positron (or positively charged electron) and a neutrino (which is like a little fragment of subatomic glue), becoming a bare neutron. Because positively and neutrally charged particles *can* stick together, they do, forming a nucleus of deuterium. This is called "heavy" hydrogen because the nucleus is freighted with an unaccustomed neutron.

Anyone might suppose that, because the instance of fusion is so rare among protons, the next step might be dissolution. With the next jostling *ping!*, in the next hundred-millionth of a second, the deuterium nucleus will fall apart. Then, from the dense crowd of particles surrounding it, the neutron will collect its positron and neutrino, which cannot have gone far in such a short time; it will patch itself together and resume its life as a proton.

But that is not what happens. The proton-neutron marriage endures for an average of six seconds, or only six hundred million more collisions, before another proton joins up.

BANG!

This collision leaves each of the partners individually unchanged, but releases a unit of energy—the charge-

less, massless photon, vibrating at the extreme frequencies of gamma radiation. This photon goes on its way, leaving a *ménage à trois*, the helium nucleus. This is called "light" helium because it's missing a second neutron to complete its normal structure.

After another million years or so of further bumping on the crowded proton dancefloor, two of these light helium nuclei will themselves chance to collide. Their collective four protons and two neutrons will swing around each other, *dos-a-dos*, and form a new configuration. This will be a stable nucleus of regular helium—with two protons, two neutrons—and a pair of free protons, which go back into the dance and begin looking for other partners.

Meanwhile, the photon that had emerged from the second fusion collision radiating like a gamma ray will take part in no more combinations. The positron that was ejected from the first collision will soon meet a free electron, its antiparticle, in the plasma soup and annihilate it. The product of this mutual destruction is a pair of energetic photons, which are also radiating up in the gamma region of the electromagnetic spectrum.

So, in all, while six protons slowly turn themselves into a helium nucleus and a pair of stragglers down in the core of an average yellow star, three high-energy photons are created and released.

Three tiny sparks of light are produced in three separate collisions that are relatively widely spaced over time and distance, among trillions of other collisions that produce not so much visible energy as our archetypal *ping!* These tiny sparks spring forth into a crush of matter so dense and opaque that atoms themselves must shed their electron clouds and flow as a kinetic plasma. Is it any wonder that the core of a G-type yellow is blacker than the darkest edge of space?

Blacker, but not colder. These three energetic protons will contribute their energy to the heat of the star's core as they pass, bouncing off protons and light helium nuclei alike, on their way through the shuffling crowd.

In this pitch and toss of photons moving back and forth across the core, none has a preference for direction. Each photon strikes a larger particle and rebounds—or, in technical terms, is absorbed and immediately reradiated—like wild dancers slamming their way across the floor. Their direction is random. That is, none can *choose* to move toward the widelines and spin away from the dance. And anyway, each photon will move only a fraction of a centimeter—one more measure valid only in Earthly terms—before striking another particle and reradiating in another direction.

While none of these photons has the thought of escaping the core and moving out into the star's higher layers, still some—a small fraction—happen to do just that. These represent the "excess" energy in the core; that is, the amount of heat greater than is needed to keep up the pressure and hold the core from collapsing under the inward push of gravity from the overlying material. These few excess photons do reach the dancefloor's sidelines and are shed upward, toward the star's surface.

In the dense, opaque layers above the core, each

photon continues the game of absorption and reradiation, bouncing one step forward and two steps back. And as the photon encounters the cooler layers above, it may also lose some of its energy; the frequency of its vibration becomes slower, its wavelength longer. On average. A few photons may maintain their potency over the long haul, but not all of them, certainly. In general, gamma rays at the core become x-rays in the intervening layers, then ultraviolet rays just below the surface, and then mostly visible light—again an Earthly, human term—at the surface.

In the outer region, about two-thirds of the way to the surface, the stellar gases cool from fifteen million degrees to about two million. These cool gases become nearly opaque, so the distance that any photon can travel by bouncing around becomes insignificant. At the same time, however, in this region the temperature difference between the bottom, innermost layers and the top, outermost layers becomes much greater. Also, the cooler gases throughout this region are less dense, and so less stable. Thus, hotter material from the star's innermost depths flies upward like steam bubbles in a saucepan, in a process called "convection." This action then drives the cooler, relatively denser material near the star's surface downward in an endless, rolling boil.

So, in the opaque region of the star's interior, the photons stop traveling by their bounces over centimeters and fractions; instead they ride with the roiling atoms of the convection layer. It is as if they were taking express elevators up to the surface regions of the sun.

Any single photon—or, to be precise, the track of multiply absorbed and reradiated photons—spends about ten million years in passing from an initial fusion collision in the core to its visible-light escape at the surface. For most of this immense time, the photon is bouncing forward and back in the packed interior, and for a shorter time the photon rises effortlessly in dark columns of boiling gas.

At the surface these columns—like thunderhead cells along a storm front, or bubbles rising in a pot of porridge—shape the outward face of the sun. These up-welling fountains of gas form flattened, mushroom caps that are the size of the Earthly State of Texas. Existing in constant motion, these columns thrust up the spicules of hot gas which feed the chromosphere; they also push around the magnetically active regions which control the shape of the superheated solar corona.

In short, these granulated columns of rising gas direct

the divergent flow of electromagnetic energies that most affects the lives of humans on that little green world. If not for the movement of these convection cells beneath the surface, the star would shed its energy in a single, impartial, uniform glow.

In fact, that was how, for thousands of years, the humans of that green world thought about their "day star," their sun, their god Aton: as a single, unchanging beacon, uniform in its benevolence, unswerving in its outpourings, impartial in its gift of energy, consistent in its love.

Of course, they were wrong.

Ping!

Pong!

Pong!

Pong!

The initiatory collision of one proton with another—that once-in-a-forty-trillion-trillion event which sheds a positronic charge and ultimately gives birth to a triplet of wandering photons—is only the usual sequence in the sun's core. It represents, over time, only the average of all possible interactions.

This dance of separate particles and photons is controlled by the workings of probability, a science which will be much studied on the small green planet. Probability and the laws of chance say that, over all time, in the universe taken as a whole, the high points and the low match up and cancel each other out. They level all possible experiences to a nice, stable median point in a smooth curve.

But this is only one picture of reality. It's a working conceptual definition—not reality itself.

Now and then, here and there, the framework of probability breaks down. Sometimes the real world swings wide and deep in establishing that balanced median. And so, in that particular time and place, the long run and the universe as a whole are temporarily forgotten.

More and more of those initial *ping* collisions may happen to produce many more nuclei of deuterium and loose photons than the forty-trillion-trillionth of a chance would indicate. At that point, the consequences can be immediate and astounding.

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

Then highly unusual things can start happening. ♦

Looking Forward:

The Cold Cash War

by Robert Asprin

Coming in September 1992 from Ace Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett



Cover art by Neal McPheeers

When this book was written, the Cold War had not yet thawed. Prophetically, Bob Asprin saw a day when the multinational companies, not governments, would contest for control of the world. *The Cold Cash War* is set in a near future when the megacorporations have decided that real war is too messy and hard on their assets.

The book follows the exploits of a corporate mercenary who is also a *real* mercenary with years of combat experience. It's a fast-paced action-adventure with enough wry humor to please all of Asprin's fans. Through the eyes of Major Tidwell, you follow the transition from nationalism to a world in which corporations use their political power and financial strength to dominate their local governments . . . a scenario that sounds uncomfortably familiar today.

The sound of automatic weapons fire was clearly audible in the Brazilian night as Major Tidwell crawled silently the length of the shadow, taking pains to keep his elbows close to his body. Tree shadows were only so wide. He probed ahead with his left hand until he found the fist-sized rock with the three sharp corners which he had gouged as his landmark.

Once it was located, he sprang the straps on the jump pad he had been carrying over his shoulder and eased it into position. With the care of a professional, he double-checked its alignment: front edge touching the rock and lying at a forty-five-degree angle to an imaginary line running from the rock to the large tree on his left, flat on the ground, no wrinkles or lumps.

This done, he allowed himself the luxury of taking a moment to try to see the scanner fence. Nothing. He shook his head with grudging admiration. If it hadn't been scouted and confirmed in advance, he would never have known there was a "fence" in front of him. The set

posts were camouflaged to the point where he couldn't spot them even knowing what he was looking for, and there were no telltale light beams penetrating the dark of the night. Yet he knew that just in front of him was a maze of relay beams which, if interrupted, would trigger over a dozen autount weapons and direct their fire into a ten-meter-square area centering on the point where the beams were interrupted. An extremely effective trap as well as a foolproof security system, but it was only five meters high.

He smiled to himself. Those cost accountants will do it to you every time. Why build a fence eight meters high if you can get by with one five meters high? The question was, could they get by with a five-meter fence?

Well, now was as good a time as any to find out. He checked the straps of his small backpack to be sure there was no slack. Satisfied there was no play to throw him off balance, his hand moved to his throat mike.

"Lieutenant Decker!"

"Here, sir!" The voice of his first lieutenant was soft in the earphone. It would be easy to forget that he was actually over five hundred meters away leading the attack on the south side of the compound. Nice about fighting for the IIT-*iots*—your communications were second to none.

"I'm in position now. Start the diversion."

"Yes, sir!"

He rose slowly to a low crouch and backed away from the pad several steps in a duck walk. The tiny luminous dots on the corners of the jump pad marked its location for him exactly.

Suddenly, the distant firing doubled in intensity as the diversionary frontal attack began. He waited several heartbeats for any guard's attention to be drawn to the distant fight, then rose to his full height, took one long stride, and jumped on the pad hard with both feet.

The pad recoiled from the impact of his weight, kicking him silently upward. As he reached the apex of his flight, he tucked and somersaulted like a diver, extending his legs again to drop feet first; but it was still a long way down. His forward momentum was lost by the time he hit the ground, and the impact forced him to his knees as he tried to absorb the shock. He fought for a moment to keep his balance, lost it, and fell heavily on his back.

"Damn!" He quickly rolled over onto all fours and scuttled crabwise forward to crouch in the deep shadow next to the autogun turret. Silently he waited, not moving a muscle, eyes probing the darkness.

He had cleared the "fence." If he hadn't, he would be dead. But if any guards were left, the sound of his fall would have alerted them. There hadn't been much noise, but it didn't take much. These Oil Slickers were good.

Finally his diligence was rewarded—a small flicker of movement by the third hut. Moving slowly, the major loosened the strap on his pistol. His gamble of carrying the extra bulk of a silenced weapon was about to pay off. Drawing the weapon, he eased it forward and settled the luminous sights in the vicinity of the movement, waiting for a second tip-off to fix the guard's location.

Suddenly he holstered the weapon and drew his knife instead. If there was one, there would be two, and the sound of his shot, however muffled, would tip the second guard to sound the alarm. He'd just have to do this the hard way.

He had the guard spotted now, moving silently from hut to hut. There was a pattern to his search, and that pattern would kill him. Squat and check shadows beside the hut, move, check window, move, check window, move, hesitate, step into alley between the huts with rifle at ready, hesitate three beats to check shadows in alley, move, squat and check side shadows, move. . . .

Apparently the guard thought the intruder, if he existed, would be moving deeper into the compound and was hoping to come to him silently from behind. The only trouble was, the intruder was behind him.

Tidwell smiled. Come on, sonny! Just a few more steps. Silently he drew his legs under him and waited. The guard had reached the hut even with the turret he was crouched behind. Squat, move, check window, move, check window, move, hesitate, step into alley. . . .

He moved forward in a soft glide. For three heartbeats the guard was stationary, peering into the shadows in the alley between the huts. In those three heartbeats Tidwell closed the distance between them in four long strides, knife held low and poised. His left arm snaked forward and snapped his forearm across the guard's windpipe, ending any possibility of an outcry as the knife darted home under the left shoulder blade.

As the knife blade retracted into its handle, the man managed to flinch with surprise before his body went into the forced, suit-induced limpness ordered by his belt computer. Either the man had incredible reflexes or his suit was malfunctioning.

Tidwell eased the "dead" body to the ground, then swiftly removed the ID bracelet. As he rose, he glanced at the man's face and hesitated involuntarily. Even in the dark he knew him—Clancy! He should have recognized him from his style. Clancy smiled and winked to acknowledge mutual recognition. You couldn't do much else in a "dead" combat suit.

Tidwell paused long enough to smile and tap his fallen rival on the forehead with the point of his knife. Clancy rolled his eyes in silent acknowledgement. He was going to have a rough time continuing his argument that knives were inefficient after tonight.

Then the major was moving again. Friendship was fine, but he was running behind schedule. A diversion can only last so long. Quickly he backtracked Clancy's route, resheathing his knife and drawing his pistol as he went. A figure materialized out of the shadows ahead.

"I told you there wouldn't be anything there!" came the whispered comment.

Tidwell shot him in the chest, his weapon making a muffled "pft," and the figure crumpled. Almost disdainfully, the major relieved him of his ID bracelet. Obviously this man wouldn't last long. In one night he had made two major mistakes: ignoring a sound in the night, and talking on silent guard. It was men like this who gave mercenaries a bad name. ♦

Tomorrow's Books

September 1992 Releases

Compiled by Susan C. Stone
and Bill Fawcett

Lynn Abbey and Robert Asprin: *Catwoman*, Warner Books, pb orig, 96 pp, \$4.99. Batman spin-off book.

Batman hunts a black market arms dealer while Catwoman stalks a man who makes jewelry from endangered cats. As the trails converge, Catwoman and Batman confront their enemies and each other in a battle for justice.

Ray Aldridge: *The Orpheus Machine*, Bantam Spectra SF Adventure, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. In a galaxy of slaves the Emancipator wages a one-man war for freedom. But when he is shipwrecked into the clutches of the chaos-creating Orpheus Machine, he faces the ultimate enemy, and discovers a mind-bending plot for galactic domination. Book III in the *Emancipator* series, preceded by *The Pharaoh Contract* and *The Empor of Everything*.

Poul Anderson: *Maurai & Kitib*, Tor SF, pb reiss w/new cover, 288 pp, \$3.99. As the People of the Sky and the People of the Sea build new civilizations that rise out of the ashes of the long-past War of Judgement, they come into contact and conflict with each other.

Piers Anthony: *The Color of Her Panties*, AvoNova Fantasy, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.99. This fifteenth adventure in the pun-filled *Xanth* series features the fabulous egg that sits between the Roc and the hard place and complica-

tions concerning the oft-viewed undies of Mela Merwoman.

Piers Anthony: *Ghost*, Tor SF, pb reiss, 288 pp, \$3.99. In a quest for new energy resources, the captain of a time-ship is sent to explore the void beyond the universe and discovers . . . ghosts.

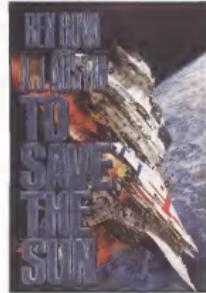
Isaac Asimov presents: *The Super Hugos*, Baen SF, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.99. A collection of previous winners of the prestigious Hugo Award, chosen as the best of the best by the members of the 1992 World SF Convention.

Robert Asprin: *The Cold Cash War*, Ace SF, pb rep, 224 pp, \$4.50. A view of the near future, where hostile corporate takeovers involve real weapons, real bloodshed, real war . . .

Gregory Benford: *Timescape*, Bantam Spectra SF Classic, pb rep, 496 pp, \$5.99. Nebula Award winning novel of a near-future Earth on the brink of ecological disaster, an Earth that can only be saved by a group of scientists working desperately to communicate with a scientist in the 1960s to warn of the catastrophe that will destroy the future if it is not averted in the past.

Ben Bova and A.J. Austin: *To Save the Sun*, Tor SF, hc, 384 pp, \$21.95. The old emperor defied his advisors to commit his empire to saving ancient Earth's dying sun. Now his successor must continue the task in spite of those in his court who scheme to stop the effort or divert it to their own ends.

Marion Zimmer Bradley and Paul Edwin Zimmer: *The Survivors*, DAW



SF, pb reiss, 240 pp, \$3.99. After surviving the challenge of the Hunters of the Red Moon, Dane Rianna and Aratak agree to investigate a Closed World, where the only thing they're guaranteed is mystery and danger. Sequel to *Hunters of the Red Moon*.

Lois McMaster Bujold: *Ethan of Athos*, Baen SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.99. A doctor from the planet Athos, where women are forbidden, meets an utterly gorgeous Dendarii Mercenary Commander, and their alliance is forged from necessity and more . . .

Edgar Rice Burroughs: *The Cave Girl*, Del Rey, pb rep, 256 pp, \$3.99. Marooned on a primitive island, an unlikely hero faces a savage destiny—and wins the heart of a princess.

Edgar Rice Burroughs: *The Lost Continent*, Del Rey, pb rep, 144 pp, \$3.99. To the civilized world, Europe is a fearsome legend, until one man rediscovers it and finds more than he ever imagined.

Edgar Rice Burroughs: *The Monster Men*, Del Rey, pb rep, 208 pp, \$3.99. Was the man called Bulan a jungle god—or a creation of unholy science?

Orson Scott Card: *Ender's Game*, Tor SF, tr pb, 256 pp, \$10.95. Revised author's definitive edition of this Hugo and Nebula Award winning novel, with new introduction by the author. (Also available in 300-copy limited edition, leather bound hc, \$200.00—orders to be filled on a first-come basis.) Andrew "Ender" Wiggin thinks he's playing com-

Key to Abbreviations

hc: hardcover, always an original publication.

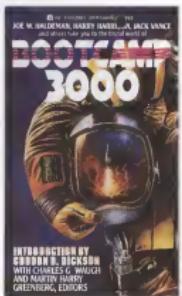
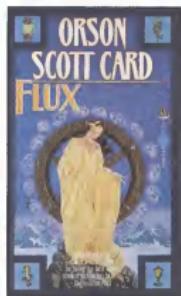
pb orig: paperback original, not published previously in any other format.

pb reiss: paperback reissue, designating a title that was previously published in paperback but has been out of print.

pb rep: paperback reprint, designating a title that was previously published

in hardcover or trade paperback (sometimes expressed as **first time in pb**).

tr pb: trade paperback, a format using pages larger than a paperback but generally smaller than a hardcover, with a flexible cover.



puter simulated war games at the Battle School, but the war is no game.

Orson Scott Card: *Speaker for the Dead*, Tor SF, tr pb, 304 pp, \$10.95. Revised author's definitive edition of this Hugo and Nebula Award winning novel, with new introduction by the author. Sequel to *Ender's Game*. Three thousand planet-bound years after Ender Wiggin won humanity's war with the Buggers, the still-young Ender finishes his journey to find he's become anathema. But when aliens are discovered on the planet Lusitania, Ender comes to Lusitania to unravel its secrets.

Orson Scott Card: *Flux: Tales of Human Futures*, Tor SF, first time in pb, 256 pp, \$4.99. Seven tales of possible futures, with introductions and afterwords by the author. The second section of *Maps in a Mirror*.

Peter David: *Imzadi*, Pocket Books, hc, 350 pp, \$20.00. A *Star Trek: The Next Generation* book that explores both the past and the future of the relationship between Riker and Troi—and confronts them with a choice between their duty to Star Fleet and each other.

L. Sprague de Camp & Fletcher Pratt: *The Complete Compleat Enchanter*, Baen Fantasy, pb reiss, 544 pp, \$5.99. The application of symbolic logic to ancient magic transports Harold Shea to an other-dimensional land of myth and magic.

L. Sprague de Camp & Christopher Stasheff, with Holly Lisle, John Maddox Roberts, & Tom Wham: *The Enchanter Reborn*, Baen Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. Subtitled *The Continuing Adventures of the Incomplete Enchanter*. In this collection of new stories, Harold Shea journeys to a dangerous land of myth and magic, where it takes fast talking and fast swordplay to survive.

L. Sprague de Camp and Catherine

Crook de Camp: *The Pixilated Peeress*, Del Rey Fantasy, first time in pb, 208 pp, \$4.99. A farcical fantasy novel about a warrior unwillingly drafted into protecting and paying the way for an eight-armed countess with grasping ways.

Edited by Gordon R. Dickson, with Charles G. Waugh and Martin Harry Greenberg: *Bootcamp 3000*, Ace SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. An anthology of stories of the wars of tomorrow from outstanding names in science fiction today. With an introduction by Dickson. (Previous volume in this series, *Space Dogfights*, edited by Joe Haldeman, with Waugh and Greenberg.)

Carole Nelson Douglas: *Cup of Clay*, Tor Fantasy, first time in pb, 352 pp, \$3.99. A Twin Cities reporter finds herself in the magical land of Veil and involved in a quest for the Cup of Earth, a talisman only a Taliswoman can hope to understand. Book 1 of a new series, *The Taliswoman*.

L. Warren Douglas: *A Plague of Change*, Del Rey SF, pb orig, 272 pp, \$3.99. Beyond the antimatter barrier known as the Reef, human colonies are dying out . . . until the wayward heir to a planet sets out to reshape their future.

David Drake: *The Military Dimension*, Baen SF, pb reiss, 288 pp, \$4.50. A collection of David Drake's military science fiction short stories.

David Drake: *The Square Deal*, Tor SF, tr pb orig, 224 pp, \$8.95. Number 1 in the *Car Warriors* series. Novel tie-in with the popular *Car Wars* game by Steve Jackson Games.

Doris Egan: *The Gate of Ivory*, DAW SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.50. First volume in the *Ivory* series. Raised in a universe of scientific logic, Theodora of Pyrene couldn't resist the lure of a world where magic was real . . . but she hadn't anticipated the danger.

Doris Egan: *Two-Bit Heroes*, DAW SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.99. Second volume in the *Ivory* series. A case of mistaken identity leaves Theodora and Ran, her Ivory Sorcerers, trapped between imperial troops and dangerous outlaws.

Doris Egan: *Guilt-Edged Ivory*, DAW SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. Third volume in the *Ivory* series. After witnessing a murder on a world where science and magic meet, scholarly Theodora, and Ran, leader of a powerful family of sorcerers, must find the murderer and prove their own innocence.

Phyllis Raybin Emerit: *Ghosts, Hauntings, and Mysterious Happenings*, Tor Young Adult, pb orig, 128 pp, \$2.50. A collection of true tales of ghosts and mysterious happenings.

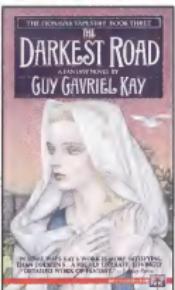
Elizabeth Engstrom: *Nightmare Flower*, Tor Horror/Fantasy, hc, 224 pp, \$18.95. A collection of dark fantasy stories.

Alan Dean Foster: *Star Trek Log 3*, Del Rey SF, pb reiss w/ new cover, \$4.99. More adventures of James T. Kirk and the *Enterprise*, based on the animated series.

C.S. Friedman: *Black Sun Rising*, DAW Fantasy, first time in pb, 592 pp, \$5.99. Twelve centuries after being stranded on a distant planet, descendants of the original colonists from Earth struggle against the fae, a terrifying force that preys upon the human mind, giving life to a person's most treasured dreams . . . and their worst nightmares.

C.S. Friedman: *In Conquest Born*, DAW SF, pb reiss, 512 pp, \$3.95. They were generals of two star empires forever opposed—and worlds would fall before their private war.

C.S. Friedman: *The Madness Season*, DAW SF, pb reiss, 496 pp, \$4.95. To survive the alien conquest, he must conquer all that is alien within himself.



Craig Shaw Gardner: *A Bad Day for Ali Baba*, Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.50. A farcical take-off on Ali Baba and the forty thieves. Continuing the Arabian adventures which began in *The Other Sinbad*.

Mark A. Garland and Charles G. McGraw: *Dorella*, Baen Fantasy, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.50. Throughout time, there have been gods among us. Dorella, living on the Upper East Side of New York, wonders if she and her sister might be the last of their ancient kind, until, across time and dimensions, she senses a presence searching . . . hunting for her.

Simon Green: *Mistworld*, Ace SF, pb orig, 224 pp, \$4.50. Mistworld has a reputation as a haven for outlaws in a space empire that's rotten to the core. But now someone is stalking the fog-shrouded streets, killing and mindburning at will.

Martin H. Greenberg, editor: *Dracula: Prince of Darkness*, DAW Horror, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. An anthology of Dracula stories by well-known horror, mystery and fantasy writers.

Gary Gygax: *The Anubis Murders*, Roc Fantasy, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.95. The first volume in a new fantasy mystery series, entitled *Dangerous Journeys*.

Elizabeth Hand: *Aestival Tide*, Bantam Spectra Literary SF, pb orig, 416 pp, \$5.50. In a world ravaged by centuries of nuclear and biological warfare, the once-a-decade Aestival Tide brings excesses and decadence to a fever pitch. And this year, the long-dreaded legend of the city's destruction is about to come true. Sequel to *Winterlong*.

Harry Harrison and David Harris: *Bill the Galactic Hero #6: The Final Incoherent Adventure*, AvoNova SF, pb orig, 224 pp, \$4.50. In the conclusion of this wacky, irreverent science fiction adventure series, the perfect star-

ship trooper is recruited to lead a suicide mission or die trying. Includes a bonus portfolio of combat sketches by illustrator Mark Pacella. A Byron Preiss Visual Publications, Inc. book.

David G. Hartwell, editor: *Foundations of Fear: An Exploration of Horror, Tor Horror*, hc, 672 pp, \$29.95. A companion volume to *World Fantasy Award winner The Dark Descent*.

Robert Holdstock: *The Bone Forest*, AvoNova Fantasy, pb, first U.S. publication, 256 pp, \$4.50. A collection of eight short stories by the author of the *World Fantasy Award* winning classic *Mythago Wood*, containing a new novella set in the *Mythago* universe.

Robert E. Howard: *Cthulhu: The Mythos and Kindred Horrors, Baen Fantasy*, pb rcs, 256 pp, \$4.99. A collection of Robert E. Howard's stories set in H. P. Lovecraft's *Cthulhu* mythos, selected by David Drake.

Dean Ing: *The Nemesis Mission*, Tor Technothriller, first time in pb, 480 pp, \$5.99. U.S. agent uses a high-tech, ultralight, solar-powered spy plane against a Colombian drug kingpin.

Dean Ing: *The Ransom of Black Stealth One*, Tor Technothriller, pb rcs, 480 pp, \$5.99. The intelligence community mobilizes all of its resources in a race to retrieve a stolen top-secret stealth aircraft before it falls into the wrong hands.

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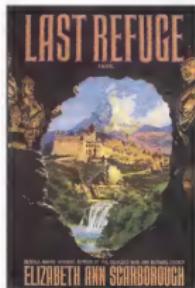
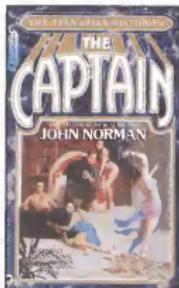
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Ursula K. Le Guin: *Fish Soup*, Atheneum Books for Children, hc, 48 pp, \$13.95. With 19 two-color illustrations by Patrick Wynne. A magical, thoughtful fable about the pitfalls of expectations, great and small, for young readers (ages 7-9), by the author of the *Earthsea* series.

Alex McDonough: *Dragon's Eye*, Ace SF, pb orig, 176 pp, \$4.99. Scorpio, the mysterious alien studying earth's history, and his human companion, must travel through time and space to save his people from extinction. A Byron Preiss Visual Publications, Inc. book. Sequel to *Dragon's Blood*.

Vonda N. McIntyre: *Metaphase*, Bantam Spectra SF, pb orig, 368 pp, \$4.99. Book 3 in the *Starfarers* series, sequel to *Transition*. A first contact team explores the planetoid that houses the alien squidmoth, to learn to communicate with it while also dealing with the dangers of their sabotaged ship.

Judith Moffett: *Time Like an Ever-Rolling Stream*, St. Martin's Press, hc, 352 pp, \$21.95. This sequel to *The Rag-*



ged *World* is a multifaceted exploration of human and alien relationships, of the substance of time, and of rural Kentucky.

Grant Naylor: *Red Dwarf*, Roc SF, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.99. A humorous British science fiction novel based on the underground TV hit.

Douglas Niles: *The Coral Kingdom*, TSR, Inc., pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.95. A princess is pitted against a savage undersea race that hold her father prisoner. A FORGOTTEN REALMS® Fantasy Adventure; Book Two in *The Druidhome Trilogy*, preceded by *Prophet of Moonshae*.

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Ellen Porath: *Steel and Stone*, TSR, Inc., pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.95. The story of the turbulent romance between Ki-tiara and Tanis as they quest throughout the world of Krynn. A novel based on the DRAGONLANCE® Saga, Volume Five in *The Meetings Sextet*.

Mike Resnick: *Walpurgis III*, Questar SF, pb rep, 208 pp, \$4.99. Jericho, the galaxy's most deadly assassin, is hired to kill Conrad Bland, a creature capable of destroying all life in the universe, who has been offered refuge on the savage world Walpurgis III.

John Maddox Roberts: *The Temple of the Muses*, Avon Mystery, pb orig, 224 pp, \$4.50. Third in the *SPQR Mystery* series of police procedural mysteries set in Roman times, from an often published fantasy author. The two earlier books were Edgar Award nominees.

Spider and Jeanne Robinson: *Starseed*, Ace SF, first time in pb, 256 pp, \$4.99. An earth-born dancer, betrayed by her body, volunteers with the Starseed Foundation to join with the

symbiotic lifeform that allows humans to live in the vacuum of space and give her only chance to dance again. A return to the universe created in the Hugo and Nebula Award winning *Stardance*.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch, editor: *The Best of Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine*, St. Martin's Press, first time in pb (tr pb), 352 pp, \$13.95. The 25 best stories, ranging from SF to horror to fantasy, from the acclaimed magazine.

Frederick Saberhagen: *Berserker*, Ace SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.99. First volume in the popular *Berserker* series.

Elizabeth Ann Scarborough: *Last Refuge*, Bantam Spectra Fantasy, 352 pp, hc \$22.50 / tr pb \$11.00. A woman leaves Shambala, the Tibetan oases of safety that has protected its inhabitants from the ravages of a nuclear catastrophe, and journeys into the blasted land to find and rescue other survivors of the holocaust. Sequel to *Nothing Sacred*.

Christopher Stasheff: *A Company of Stars*, Del Rey SF, first time in pb, 320 pp, \$4.99. The first book of the *Starship Trouper*s. By the 26th century, humanity has an interstellar dominion, but Broadway is still Broadway....

Jack Vance: *Eccentric Old Earth*, Tor SF, first time in pb, 448 pp, \$4.99. The planet Cadwal was established as a natural preserve for unique species, and its human Conservators must fight against a conspiracy to open it for full colonization and exploitation. Volume 2 of *The Cadwal Chronicles*.

John Vornholt: *Sanctuary*, Pocket Books, pb orig, 270 pp, \$4.99. Book #61 in the *Star Trek* series. Kirk, Spock, and McCoy pursue a dangerous criminal to the fabled planet Sanctuary, a mysterious world which harbors deadly secrets and never releases its visitors.

H.G. Wells: *The Invisible Man*, Tor

Classic, pb reiss, 192 pp, \$2.50. Unabridged edition of the classic science fiction novel about a scientist who has discovered the secret of invisibility and is going murderously mad. With an introduction by Gregory Benford.

Walter Jon Williams: *Aristol*, Tor SF, hc, 448 pp, \$22.95. Ultra-high technology in the far-distant future has given a few humans godlike powers. What happens when one of those few goes mad?

Jane Yolen: *Briar Rose*, Tor Fantasy, hc, 192 pp, \$18.95. Lates in the Fairy Tale series created and edited by Terri Windling. *Briar Rose* twines together the tale of Sleeping Beauty with a dark story of the young woman's search for her grandmother's WWII past—written by a World Fantasy Award winner.

Roger Zelazny and Thomas T. Thomas: *Flare*, Baen SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. In the face of an enormous solar flare, the future of human civilization is suddenly in doubt.

Roger Zelazny and Thomas T. Thomas: *The Mask of Loki*, Baen Fantasy, pb reiss, 352 pp, \$4.95. From the 13th century to the 21st, Loki's Avatar and the Assassin have battled, but each time the Avatar is reborn, the Assassin tires....

Roger Zelazny: *This Immortal*, Baen SF, pb reiss, 224 pp, \$4.99. In Conrad's latest incarnation, he's been appointed native guide to an alien from Vega, one of the superior beings who rules Earth, and Conrad is Earth's last and best chance for survival. Hugo Award winning classic science fiction novel.

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The Ethics of Terraforming

Stephen L. Gillett

In the last couple of columns I've described how, with great effort, using far-future technologies, and with lots of time (and money!)—we might be able to make Venus and Mars into reasonable facsimiles of the Earth.

But why bother? As I showed, terraforming is no cheap way to a second Earth, no quick 'n' dirty refuge for those wishing to escape an increasingly crowded and regulated home planet. Hijacking a couple of comets won't terraform Mars, and a rocketful of algae won't terraform Venus. *Au contraire*; terraforming requires tremendous capital investment and a very long time. It's hardly a hiding place for political mavericks!

Even more philosophically, you might ask: by what right would human beings presume to transform other planets in the Solar System in the first place? After all, we've severely impacted our own Earth! It's not surprising that many environmentalists have reacted to terraforming schemes with all the enthusiasm with which they regard Glen Canyon Dam, or the proposal to build a sea-level canal across Central America with nuclear explosives. Terraforming seems to many people to be more technology run wild, more meddling for the sake of meddling.

It turns out that answering the second, philosophical question goes a long way toward answering "Why bother?" But first, it is easy to find one criterion that would absolutely preclude terraforming: there must be *no* indigenous life. Not merely no

macroscopic life, but no *life*: no microbes, no algae, no viruses. Expanding into empty habitats is one thing, but planetary genocide would be quite another.

Any such usurpation would not "merely" be immoral; it would be unbelievably stupid. Even the simplest living cells are vastly complex entities, and studying truly exotic life would teach us immeasurably about our own. Additionally, of course, the philosophic ramifications would be profound: that we really are not alone. Obliterating such knowledge would be far worse than the burning of the library at Alexandria.

But: while remembering this caveat about biocide, we must also remember the absolute sterility of dead worlds. It's difficult to overemphasize this "deadness," because the absolute absence of life lies completely outside our experience.

On Earth, you can't do so much as clean the bathroom without disrupting other living things. No place on the Earth is absolutely dead. Even in the center of the Antarctic you can find microbes. And, of course, a project like a dam causes vast disruption; not merely individual plants and animals, but entire ecosystems are obliterated and replaced with others. Thus everything's a tradeoff: If you build a dam to irrigate a desert, for example, you can destroy as many environments as you create.

In complete contrast, no ecologic disruption occurs on a dead world—*"ecology"* is meaningless without

life. You can no more "disrupt the ecology" of a dead planet than you can kill a doornail. Nothing is displaced; nothing dies.

However: how do we know—how *can* we know—that Venus and Mars, the most probable terraforming candidates, are utterly and completely dead? Well, we don't absolutely know, now. And before any sort of terraforming scheme could be seriously entertained, the question must be answered firmly.

How? Ultimately we should be able to say whether life is present just by looking at the environment. That is, we'll know not by more exploration; not merely by more diligent scraping under "just one more rock" for microbes that *might* be there, but by more research into determining what life *is* by what it *does*. It seems that life—any life—requires an energy gradient to exist, and in existing it must also generate products that are far out of simple chemical and physical equilibrium with its environment. In other words, life locally decreases entropy—that is, it increases ordering—and to do that it requires a source and a sink for energy. To decrease the entropy locally, of course, means you have to increase it somewhere else. And that means a flow of energy must exist—the environment can't be a closed system.

So, to determine whether life is present, we'll have to see if the processes in the prospective environment can be explained simply, by

straightforward chemical reactions and physical interactions. If they can't be so explained, life may be present. This approach also gets rid of another straw man, by the way: the "life as we don't know it" scenario. Even if the life is not like Earth life, it will have to be doing *something* that implies major chemical disequilibrium.

Mars and Venus are most likely dead because they're too well explained by simple inorganic chemistry. Their atmospheres, for example, are in stark contrast to the chemical stew in our own—a stew, furthermore, that wouldn't last any time if it weren't constantly maintained by living things. Such considerations, by the way, originally inspired James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, the idea that in some sense the interactions of the entire biosphere are acting like an organism. Indeed, Lovelock irritated some of the Viking biologists by predicting that Mars was dead long before the robot had landed!

But even a dead world could carry a priceless burden of information. It could include geologic records of Solar System history, it could be a natural laboratory of (literally!) un-Earthly conditions, or it could even be source of esthetic inspiration, like a wilderness park on Earth. Careful economic exploitation could take place without causing major damage to such values. A planetary-scale project like terraforming, however, would destroy or severely impact many of them.

Thus, there must be a very good reason to totally remake a world—quite apart from the absurd economics. What could such a reason be?

It's simple: extending life into the universe. Life is probably rare, and may possibly be unique. Life has already turned out to be rarer than many scientists had hoped, right before space probes started investigating our planetary neighbors in detail in the 60's. Neither Venus nor Mars was supposed to be dead. (Maybe in another few millennia they won't be, either, due to the efforts of human beings.) Apparently the physical conditions of a planet must be very finely balanced to evolve life *ex nihilo* (Latin, "out of nothing"), as happened on Earth, and then allow it to persist

long enough to consolidate itself. In fact, maybe Mars and Venus are so different from Earth today because life never got that initial foothold.

Thus, Earth's life may be a precious commodity indeed, well worth transplanting elsewhere. It may give a chance for almost-Earths like Venus and Mars to be alive.

In fact, you could argue (only somewhat tongue in cheek) that humanity is merely the DNA's way of getting off the planet. We are like the fluff on a dandelion seed that carries it across the field into fields beyond, or like the drifting coconut that chances upon a new beach and takes root. We are the spiderlings that ride across oceans to new lands on gossamer sails. (Or, if you prefer a less exalted analogy, we are the errant bird, carrying seeds in its gut, that craps on a barren island and thus unwittingly seeds it!)

To put it another way, we're just a dispersal mechanism. If you want to be philosophical again, perhaps this is part of the "purpose" of human beings and their spacefaring machines. The late astronomer Harlan Smith speculated that the Universe is far more hostile to life than has been thought, and that the Galaxy is waiting to be seeded.

And *this* perspective turns the naive "hands-off" ethic on its head! Maybe humans' duty to the biosphere is to extend it. Perhaps in so doing we can atone, in part, for the destruction on our own world.

Which leads into a second point: terraforming is not "just" making new worlds for people, but making new worlds for life. We sometimes forget just how little of our "habitable" Earth we can live on. Almost three-quarters of the surface is covered with dilute brine, and much of the rest is desert, or tundra, or icecap, or some other less than congenial real estate. Nearly all of humanity makes do quite happily on less than 10% of Earth's surface area.

But, because it's habitable, Earth does not support just humanity. It also supports an entire biosphere, a biosphere that includes many biological communities thriving in environments where we can't. The entire Earth is teeming with life in endless

variety in diverse settings. Even if we can't live there, something does! (And of course, all these diverse biological communities help maintain the whole biosphere by doing so.)

As humans, we really have a very parochial view of what "habitable" means, even on our very own home world. We can't even drink the seawater on our Earth!

Now consider (say) terraformed Venus. After perhaps centuries of effort, large areas will be covered with shallow seas of hypersaline brine suitable only for algae and brine shrimp. The lowlands above water level will be saline playas or rocky deserts, either of which will make the Sahara look like Tahiti. Only in the highlands, and maybe in polar lowlands, will fresh water run and climate be temperate.

That's a *habitable* planet? Not very! And it underscores how *cost-ineffective* terraforming is. If all you want is *Lebensraum*, build a fleet of space colonies instead.

Yet let's look again, at those salty Venusian seas, for example. Certainly at first they'll be filled with little besides algae and brine shrimp. But they won't always be. As evolution operates, more complex ecosystems will eventually emerge. On Earth, life adapted to such concentrated brine is rare only because those environments are rare and geologically ephemeral. (Of course, we could expedite things to start with by engineering additional brine-adapted life forms.)

And such ecosystems, adapted to unearthly seas, will exist independently of us even when we're living on the planet. In fact, many such ecosystems will exist, and they will include organisms that couldn't ever have evolved on Earth. In terraforming Venus and Mars, we will have created a host of environments which, although perhaps not comfortable for humans, will eventually thrive with Earth-descended life.

But wait now, not so glibly. How can we reproduce the subtle, intricate ecological interrelations that maintain life on Earth? This, of course, is one of the common objection made to space colonies; as anyone who's tried to keep an aquarium knows,

it's difficult to mimic a natural ecosystem in a small space. An entire planet, though, is as large as the Earth, and potentially it can support a biosphere that's just as stable.

Sure, we'll have to start small. But even "Gaia" (again using Lovelock's metaphor for the whole interrelated biosphere) must have started out small, when the primordial soup first organized itself into self-replicating DNA. This may be hard to imagine; a juvenile archetype seems a contradiction in terms. It's like trying to imagine Gandalf as a teenager! (Although Ursula Le Guin made a good stab at that in *A Wizard of Earthsea*!)

Yet Gaia—that whole set of complex interrelations between Earth life and its environment—surely didn't spring forth full-blown either, like Athena from Zeus's brow. Rather, Gaia has been growing and evolving over the history of Earth. From microbes to multicelled life, from sea to land, from coelenterate to annelid to mammal, terrestrial life has been increasing in complexity, and the feedback networks have been growing more intricate. Even with occasional setbacks like major extinctions, the intricacy of the biosphere has been increasing. It's been estimated, for example, that life was still more complex *after* the calamitous Cretaceous extinction than it was in the Cambrian period, some 500-odd million years ago.

Even now Gaia is still evolving. Innovations are being made and their consequences are being worked out—completely independently of any mischief being wrought by human beings!

I talked about two of my favorite examples of recent evolutionary innovation in a previous column (February 1992). Within the last hundred million years or so, foraminifers—single-celled animals with calcium carbonate shells—have become very common in the pelagic environment, that of the open sea. And when these critters die, their skeletons end up on the deep sea floor. Before the invasion of the pelagic realm by foraminifers, the calcium carbonate cycle was confined to shallow, continental-margin seas. Now, calcium carbonate has become a major com-

ponent of open sea sediment; and we don't know with what ultimate results. But surely there will be some effect, as limestone is carried down subduction zones to cook in the Earth's mantle.

And just within the last 70 million years or so, during the Cenozoic, the so-called Age of Mammals (or Age of Grasses, depending upon your perspective), a sea grass (*Thalassia*) has invaded shallow tropic seas and is competing with algae. Here we have the latest thing in plants—a grass—competing with the most primitive. And again, we don't know what will ultimately result.

Of course, we must have a long time available for such leisurely evolutionary innovation to happen on a terraformed planet! It would do no good for the nascent ecosystems to die miserably as the planet froze, boiled, or desiccated its way back to its original state. And *that* may be a problem. Keeping a new greenhouse runaway from occurring on Venus, or keeping Mars from refreezing, is difficult. To maintain Earthlike conditions, we may have to use such cumbersome (and expensive) subterfuges as orbital sunshades or mirrors, or vast, permanently operating industrial plants.

But if we can manage to terraform *without* such kluges, we get the other big advantage of a planetary environment: it can be stable over geologic time—hundreds of millions of years—with human intervention and without continued high-tech maintenance. In this respect, a habitable planet is very different from a space colony! And it's why it seems worthwhile to find terraforming approaches that don't involve a permanent industrial infrastructure. It's why, for example, averting a new greenhouse runaway on Venus with concentrated briny seas, to keep down the water vapor pressure, seems more promising than using giant sunshades.

In any event, there's nothing intrinsically idiotic about seeding a world and building a network of self-maintaining ecosystems. Sure, you must start small, with microbes, and work up through higher plants and animals; but such transplant is

not impossible. To extend the metaphor, transplanting Earth life to a terraformed planet is like Gaia budding, like a grass sending out stolons to take root as separate plants. And as the transplanted life evolves with its new planet, who knows what sorts of new equilibria will result?

Furthermore, if the Gaia metaphor is correct—if life truly participates in the maintenance of its own environment, rather than merely reacting to it—the new Gaias may also help keep conditions on the new worlds from lapsing back into what they were. ("New Gaias" is an awkward phrase; Martyn Fogg has dubbed the environment we hope to establish on Venus "Dione.") Of course, the gross physical parameters of the terraformed planet can't be too far out of line—no interaction of living things will keep the atmosphere from leaking away if the gravity is too weak, for example!—but once life is well established it can probably maintain itself and its environment for a very long time indeed.

Last, of course, terraforming makes it less likely that some cataclysm will obliterate all Earthly life. We don't want *all* the eggs in one basket! If we terraform, not only will life be dispersed into several baskets, the baskets won't fall apart soon. If humanity should blow itself up, or if an asteroid should smite the Earth—it's happened before, and will happen again—entire ecosystems, not merely the hardiest, will survive.

So to return to the first question: Why bother? Because whatever befalls humanity, evolution has an opportunity to work out an alternate destiny—many alternative destinies. Terraforming gives a second chance—not just for human beings, but for all Earthly life.

Let a hundred flowers bloom.

Reference:

Haynes, R.H., and McKay, C.P., Ethics and planetary engineering, in MacNiven, D., ed., *Moral expertise: studies in practical and professional ethics*, Routledge, 1990, 231 pp.

A two-part essay by a couple of long-time Mars scientists and terraforming studiers. ♦

The Ship Who Searched

Part Three: Passager

Anne McCaffrey
and
Mercedes Lackey

"Well, Tia," Doctor Kenny said genially, from his vantage point in front of her main screen. "I have to say that it's a lot more fun talking to you face-to-column than by messages or double-bounce comlink. Waiting for four hours for the punchline to a joke is a bit much."

He faced her column, not the screen; showing the same courtesy Alex always did. Alex was not aboard at the moment; Alex was down on the Base spending his bonus while Tia was in the refit docks in orbit. But since the *Pride of Albion* was so close, Doctor Kenny had decided that he couldn't resist making a visit to his most successful patient.

The new version of his chair had been perfected, and he was wearing it now. The platform and seat hid the main power supply, a shiny exoskeleton covered his legs up to his waist, and Tia thought he looked like some kind of ancient warrior-king on a throne.

"Most of my classmates don't get the points of jokes," she said, with a chuckle. "They just don't seem to have much of a sense of humor. I have to share them with you softies."

"Most of your classmates are as stiff as AIs," he countered. "Don't worry, they'll



Illustration by Todd Hamilton

loosen up in a decade or two—that's what Lars tells me, anyway. He says that living around softies will contaminate even the most rule-bound shellperson. So, how's life with a partner? As I recall, that was one of your worst worries, that you'd end up with a double-debt like Moira for playing brawn-basketball."

"I really like Alex, Kenny," she said slowly. "Especially after the Zombie-bug run. I hate to admit this, but—I even like him more than you, or Anna, or Lars. And that's what I wanted to talk to you about when you called the other day. I really . . . trust your judgment."

He nodded sagely. "And since I'm not in the brain-brawn program, I am not bound by reggs to report you when you tell me how much you are attracted to your brawn." He sent an ironic wink toward her column.

She let herself relax a little. "Something like that," she admitted. "Kenny, I just don't know what to think. He's sloppy, he's forgetful, he's a little impulsive—he has the *worst* taste in clothes—and I'd rather have him as a partner than anyone else in the galaxy. I'd rather talk to *him* than my classmates, and being classmates is supposed to be the strongest bond a shellperson can have!" Supposed to be—that was the trick, wasn't it? There was very little in her life that had happened the way it was supposed to. At this point, she should have been entering advanced studies under the auspices of the Institute—not working for it. She should have been a softie, not a shellperson.

But you didn't deal with life by dwelling on what "should" have happened. You handled it by making the best out of what *bad* happened.

"Well, Tia, you spent the first seven of your most formative years as a softperson," Kenny pointed out gently. His next words echoed her own earlier thoughts. "You never thought you'd wind up in a shell, where your classmates never knew anything but their shells and their teachers. Just like when a chick hatches—what it imprints on is what's going to fall in love with."

"I—I didn't say I was in love," she stammered, suddenly alarmed.

Kenny held his peace. He simply stared at her column with a look she remembered all too well. The one that said she wasn't entirely telling the truth, and he knew it.

"Well—maybe a little," she admitted, in a very soft voice. "But—it's not like I was another softie—"

"You can love a friend, you know," Kenny pointed out. "That's been acknowledged for centuries—even among stuffy shellperson Counselors. Remember your Greek philosophers—they felt there were three kinds of love, and only one of them had anything to do with the body. *Eros*, *filios*, and *agape*."

"Sexual, brotherly, and religious," she translated, feeling a little better. "Well, okay. *Filius*, then."

"Lars translates them as 'love involving the body,' 'love involving the mind,' and 'love involving the soul.' That's even more apt in your case," Kenny said comfortably. "Both *filius* and *agape* apply here."

"I guess you're right," she said, feeling sheepish.

"Tia, my dear," Kenny said, without a hint of patronization, "there is nothing wrong with saying that you

love your brawn—the first words you transmitted to me from your new shell, in case you've forgotten, were 'Doctor Kenny, I love you.' Frankly, I'm a lot happier hearing *this* from you than something 'appropriate.'"

"Like what?" she asked curiously.

"Hmm. Like this." He raised his voice an octave. "Well, Doctor Kennet," he said primly, "I'm quite pleased with the performance of my brawn Alexander. I believe we can work well together. Our teamwork was quite acceptable on this last assignment."

"You sound like Kari, exactly like Kari." She laughed. "Yes, but imagine trying to have this conversation with one of my BB Counselors!"

He screwed up his face and flung up his hands. "Oh, *barrings!*" he exclaimed, his expression matching the outrage in his voice. "How *could* you confess to feeling *anything*? AH One-Oh-Three-Three, I am going to *have* to report you for *instability*!"

"Precisely," she replied, sobering. "Sometimes I think they just want us to be superior sorts of Als. Self-aware, and self-motivating, but someone get out a scalpel and excise the *feeling* part before you pop them in their shells."

"There's a fine line they have to tread, dear," he told her, just as soberly. "Your classmates lack something you had—the physical nurturing of a parent. They never touched anything; they've never known anything but a very artificial environment. They don't really understand emotions, because they've never been allowed to experience them or even see them near-at-hand. I don't think there's any question in *my* mind what that means, when they first come out into the real world of us softies. It means they literally enter a world as foreign and incomprehensible as any alien culture. In some ways, it would be better if they all entered professions where they never had to deal with humans one-on-one."

"Then why—" She picked her words with care. "Why don't they put adults into shells?"

"Because adults—even children—often can't adapt to the fact that their bodies don't work anymore, and that—as you pointed out yourself—they will never have that human *touch* again." He sighed. "I've seen plenty of that in my time, too. You are an exception, my love. But you always have been special. Outstandingly flexible, adaptable." He sat back in his chair and thought; she didn't interrupt him. "Tia, there are things that I don't agree with in the way the shellperson training program is run. But you're out of the training area now, and into the real world. You'll find that even the Counselors can have an entirely different attitude out here. They're ready to accept what works, not just what's in the rulebooks."

She paused a moment before replying. "Kenny, what do I do if . . . things creep over into *eros*? I mean, I'm not going to crack my column or anything, but . . ."

"*Helva*," Kenny said succinctly. "Think of *Helva*. She and her brawn had a romance that still has power over the rest of known space. If it happens, Tia, let it happen. If it *doesn't*, don't mourn over it. Enjoy the fact that your brawn is your very best friend; that's the way it's supposed to be, after all. I have faith in your sense and sen-

sibility; I always have. You'll be fine." He coughed a little. "As it—ah—happens, I have a bit of fellow-feeling for you, Anna and I have gotten to be something of an item."

"Really?" She didn't even try to modulate the glee out of her voice. "It's about time! What did she do, tip your chair over to slow you down and seduce you on the spot?"

"That's just about word-for-word what Lars said," Kenny replied, blushing furiously. "Except that he added a few other pointed remarks."

"I can imagine," she giggled. Lars was over two centuries old, and he had seen a great deal in that time. Every kind of drama a sentient was capable of, in fact—he was the chief overseer of one of the largest hospital stations in Central Systems. If there was ever a place for life-and-death drama, a hospital station was it—as holomakers across the galaxy knew. From the smallest incident to the gravest, Lars had witnessed—and sometimes participated—in all of it.

He had been in charge of the *Pride of Albion* since it was built—he had been built into it. He would never leave, and never wanted to. Cynical, brilliant—with an unexpectedly kind heart. That was Lars. . . .

He could be the gentlest person, soft- or shell-, that Tia had ever met. Though he never missed an opportunity to jab one of his softperson colleagues with his sharp wit.

"But, Kenny—" She hesitated, eaten alive with curiosity, but unsure how far she could push. "Kenny, how nosy can I be about you and Anna?"

"Tia, I know everything there is to know about you, from your normal heart-rate to the exact composition of the chemicals in your blood when you're under stress. My doctor knows the same about me. We're both used to being poked and prodded"—he paused—"and you are my very dear friend. If there is something you are really curious about, please, go ahead and ask." His eyes twinkled. "But don't expect me to tell you about the birds and the bees."

"You're—when we first met, you called yourself a 'medico on the half-shell.' You're half machine. How does Anna—feel about that?" If she could have blushed, she would have, she felt so intrusive.

He didn't seem to feel that she was intruding, however. "Hmm, good questions. The answer, my dear, is one that I am afraid can't apply to you. I'm only 'half machine' when I'm strapped in. When I'm not in my chair, I'm an imperfect, but entirely human creature." He smiled.

"So it's like comparing rocks to bonbons." That was something she hadn't anticipated. "Or water to sheet-metal."

"Good comparisons. You're not the first to ask these questions, by the way. So don't think you're unique in being curious." He stretched, and grinned. "Anna and I are doing a lot of—hmm—personal-relations counseling of my other handicapped patients."

"At least I'm not some kind of . . . would-be voyeur." That was nice to know.

"You, however, were and are in an entirely different boat than my other patients," he warned. "What applies

to them does not apply to you." He shook his head. "I'm going to give this to you straight and without softening. You have no working nerves, sensory or motor control, below your neck. And from what I've seen, there was some further damage to the autonomic system as well before we stabilized you. With the mods they made to you when you went into the shell, you're dependent on life-support now. I don't think you could survive outside your shell—I know you wouldn't be happy."

"Oh. All right." In a way, she was both disappointed and relieved. Relieved that it was one more factor she wouldn't have to consider in her ongoing partnership. Disappointed—well, not that much. She hadn't really thought there would ever be any way to reverse the path that had brought her into her column.

"I did bring some records of the things I've been working on to show you—devices that are helping out some of our involuntary amputees. I thought you'd be interested, just on an academic basis." He slipped a datahedron into her reader, and she brought up the display on her central screen. "This young lady was a professional dancer—she was trapped under several tons of masonry after an earthquake. By the time medics got to her, the entire limb had suffered cell-death. There was no saving it."

The video portion of the clip showed a lovely young lady in leotards and tights trying out what looked like a normal leg—except that it moved very stiffly.

"The problem with the artificial limbs we've been giving amputees is that while we've fixed most of the weight and movement problems, they're still completely useless for someone like a dancer, who relies on sensory input to tell her whether or not her foot is in the right position." Kenny smiled fondly as he watched the girl on the screen. "That's Lila within a few minutes of having the leg installed. At the hip, may I add. The next clip will be three weeks later, then three months."

The screen flickered as Tia found her attention absorbed by the girl. Now she was working out in what were obviously ballet exercises, and doing very well, so far as Tia could tell. Then the screen flickered a third time—

And the girl was on stage, partnered in some kind of classic ballet piece—and if Tia had not known her left leg was cyborged, she would never have guessed it.

"Here's a speed-keyer who lost his hand," Kenny continued, but he turned towards the column. "Between my work and Moto-Prosthetics, we've beaten the sensory input problem, Tia," he said proudly. "Lila tells me she's changed choreography so that she can perform some of the more difficult moves on her left foot instead of her right. The left won't get toe blisters or broken foot bones, the tendons won't tear, the knee won't give, and the ankle has no chance of buckling. The only difference that she can see between the cyborged leg and the natural one is that the cyborg is a little heavier—not enough to make any difference to her if she can change choreography—and it's a lot sturdier."

A few more of Doctor Kenny's patients came up on the screen, but neither of them were paying attention.

"There have to be some problems," Tia said, finally. "I mean, nothing is perfect."

"We don't have *full* duplication of sensory input. In Lila's case, we have it in the entire foot and the ankle and knee joints, and we've pretty much ignored the stretches of leg in between. Weight is the other problem. The more sensory nerves we duplicate, the higher the weight. A ten-kilo hand is going to give someone a lot of trouble, for instance." Kenny shifted a little in his chair. "But all of this is coming *straight* out of what's going on in the Lab Schools, Tia! And most of it is from the brainship program—the same thing that gives you sensory input from the ships' systems are what became the sensory linkups for those artificial limbs."

"That's wonderful!" Tia said, very pleased for him.

"You're quite something, Doctor Kennet!"

"Oh, there's a lot more to be done," he said modestly. "I haven't heard any of Lila's fellow dancers clamoring to have double amputations and new legs installed. She has her problems, and there's some pain involved, even after healing is completed. In a way, it's a good thing for us that our first leg-installation was for a dancer, because Lila was used to living with pain; all dancers are. And it's *very* expensive; she was lucky, because the insurance company judged that compensating her for a lost—and very lucrative—career was more expensive than an artificial limb. Although—given the life expectancy of you shellpersons, and comparing it to those of us still in our designed-by-genetics containers—well, I can foresee a day when we'll all have our brains tucked into mini-shells when the old envelope starts to decay, and instead of deciding what clothes we want to wear, we have to decide what body to put on."

"Oh, I don't think it'll come to that, really," Tia said decisively. "For one thing, if it's expensive for one limb, a whole body would be impossible."

"It is that," Kenny agreed. "But to tell you the truth, right now the problem besides expense isn't technical—we could put the fully functioning body together, and do it today. It's actually easier to do that than just one limb. Oh, by that I mean one with full sensory inputs."

She didn't say anything, but he winked and grinned wickedly. "And by 'full sensory input,' I mean exactly what you're thinking, you naughty young lady."

"Me?" she said, with completely feigned indignation. "I have *no* idea what you're talking about! I am as innocent as—as—"

"As I am," Kenny said. "You were the one who was asking about me and Anna."

She remained silent, pretending dignity. He continued to grin; and she knew he wasn't fooled in the least.

"Well, anyway, the problem is having a life-support system for a naked brain." He shrugged. "Can't quite manage that—putting a whole body into a life-support shell is still the only way to deal with trauma like yours. And we can't fit *that* into a human-sized body."

"Oh, you could make us great *big* bodies and create a whole race of giants," she joked. "That should actually be easier, from what you've told me."

He cast his eyes upward, surprising her somewhat

with his sudden flare of exasperation. "Believe it or not, there's a fellow who wants to do something like that, for the holos. He wants to create giant full-sensory bodies of, oh . . . dinosaurs, monsters, whatever . . . hire a shell-person actor, and use the whole setup in his epics."

"No!" she exclaimed.

"I swear," he said, placing his hand over his heart. "True, every word of it. And believe it or not, he *has* the money. Holostars make more than you do, my love. I think the next time some brain wants to retire from active ship-service, especially one that's bought out his contract, this fellow just might tempt them into the holos."

"Amazing. Virtual headshaking here." She thought for a moment. "What would the chances be of creating a life-sized body with some kind of brainstem link to the shell?"

"Like a radio?" he hazarded. "Hmm. Good question. A real problem; there is a *lot* of information carried by these nerves—you'd need separated channels for everything, but . . . well, the effective range would be very, very short, otherwise you run the risk of signal breakup. That turned out to be the problem with this rig," he finished, nodding at his armored legs. "It has to stay in the same room with me, otherwise—Greek frieze time."

She laughed.

"Anyway, the whole rig would probably cost as much as a brainship, so it's not exactly practical," he concluded. "Not even for me, and they pay me very well."

Not exactly practical for me, either, she thought, and dismissed the whole idea. Practical, for a brainship, meant buying out her contract. After all, if she wanted to be free to join the Institute as an active researcher and go chasing the EsKays on her own, she was going to have to buy herself out.

"Well, money—that's the other reason I wanted to talk to you," she said.

"And the bane of the BB program rears its ugly head," he intoned, and grinned. "Oh, they're going to hate you. You're just like all the rest of the really good ones. You want to buy that contract out, don't you?"

"I don't think there are too many CS ships that *don't* plan on doing it someday," she countered. "We're people, not AI drones. We like to have a choice of where we go. So, do you have any ideas of how I can start raising my credit balance? Moira has kind of cornered the market on spotting possible new sites from orbit and entry."

"Gave her the idea, did you?" Kenny shook his finger at you. "Don't you know you should never give ideas away to the competition?"

"She wasn't competition, then," Tia pointed out.

"Well, you have a modest bonus from the Zombiebug run, right?" he said, scratching his eyebrow as he thought. "What about investing it?"

"In what?" she countered. "I don't know anything about investing money."

"Operating on my own modest success in putting my own money into Moto-Prosthetics—and not in paper stock, my dear, but in shares in the company itself—if you use your own knowledge to choose where to invest, the results can be substantial." He tapped his fingers on

the side of his chair. "It's not insider trading, if you're thinking that. I consider putting your money where your interest and expertise is."

"Virtual headshaking," she replied. "I have *no* idea what you're getting at. What do *I* know?"

"Look," he said, leaning forward, his eyes bright with intensity. "The one thing an archeologist is *always* cognizant of is the long term—especially long-term patterns. And the one thing that most often trips up the sophomores of any race is that they are *not* thinking in the long term. Look for what a friend of mine called 'disasters waiting to happen,' and invest in the companies that will be helping to recover from that disaster."

"Well, that sounds good in theory," she said doubtfully. "But in practice? How am I going to find situations like that? I'm only one person, and I've already got a job."

"Tia, you have the computing power of an entire brainship at your disposal," Kenny told her firmly. "And you have access to Institute records for every inhabited planet that also holds ruins. Use both. Look for problems the ancients had, then see if they'll happen again at current colonies."

Well, nothing sprung immediately to mind, but it *would* while away some time. And Kenny had a point.

He glanced at his wrist chrono. "Well, my shuttle should be hailing you right about—"

"Now," she finished. "It's about to dock; four slots from me, to your right as you exit the lock. Thanks for coming, Kenny."

He directed his chair to the lift. "Thank you for having me, Tia. As always, it's been a pleasure."

He looked back over his shoulder as he reached the lift, and grinned. "By the way, don't bother to check my med records. Anna has never complained about my performance yet."

If she could have blushed . . .

While Alex spent his time with some of his old classmates—presumably living up to what he had told her was the class motto, "The Party Never Ends"—she dove headlong into Institute records. The Institute gave her free, no-charge access to anything she wanted; perhaps because they saw her as a kind of member-researcher, perhaps because of her part in the Zombie-bug rescue—or perhaps because brainship access was one hole in their access system they'd never plugged because they never thought of it. Normally they charged for every record downloaded from the main archives. It didn't matter to her; there was plenty there to look into.

But first—her own peculiar quest. She caught up on everything having to do with the old EsKay investigations in fairly short order. There wasn't much of anything new from existing digs, so she checked to see what Pota and Braddon were doing, then went on to postings on brand new EsKay finds.

It was there that she came across something quite by accident.

It was actually rather amusing, when it came down to it. It was the report from a Class Two dig, from the group taking over a site that had initially gotten a lot of excite-

ment from the Exploration team. *They* had reported it as an EsKay site—the first ever to be uncovered on a non-Marslike world. And an EsKay Evaluation team was sent post-haste.

It turned out to be a case of misidentification; not EsKays at all, but another race entirely, the Megalts Tresepts, one of nowhere near as much interest to the Institute. Virtually everything was known about the Megalts; they had sent out FTL ships in the far distant past, and some of the colonies they had established still existed. Some of their artifacts looked like EsKay work, and if there was no notion that the Megalts had been in the neighborhood, it was fairly easy to make the mistake.

The world was surprisingly Terran—which would have made an EsKay site all the more valuable if it really had been there.

Although it was not an EsKay site after all, Tia continued reading the report out of curiosity. Largo Draconis was an odd little planet—with an eccentric orbit that made for one really miserable decade every century or so. Other than that, it was quite habitable; really pleasant, in fact, with two growing seasons in every year. The current settlements were ready for that dismal decade, according to the report—but also according to the report, the Megalts had been, too.

Yet the Megalts sites had been abandoned, completely. Not typical of the logical, systematic race.

During the first year of that wretched ten years, every Megalts settlement on the planet (all two of them) had been abandoned. And not because they ran out of food, either, which was her first thought. They had stockpiled more than enough to carry them through, even with no harvests at all.

No, not because the *settlers* ran out of food—but because the native rodents did.

Curious about what had happened, the Evaluation team had found the settlement records, which outlined the entire story, inscribed on the thin metal sheets the Megalts used for their permanent hardcopy storage. The settlements had been abandoned so quickly that no one had bothered to find and take them.

It was a good thing the Megalts used metal for their records; nothing else would have survived what had happened to the settlement. The rodents had swarmed both colonies; a trickle at first, hardly more than a nuisance. But then, out of nowhere, a swarm, a flood, a *torrent* of rodents had poured down over the settlement. They overwhelmed the protections in place—electric fences—and literally ate their way into the buildings. Nothing had stopped them. Killing them in hordes had done nothing. They merely ate the bodies, and kept moving in.

The evidence all pointed to a periodic change in the rodents' digestive systems that enabled them to eat *anything* with a cellulose or petrochemical base, up to and including plastic.

The report concluded with the Evaluation team's final words on the attitude of the current government of Largo Draconis, in a personal note that had been attached to the report.

"Fred: I am just glad we are getting *out* of here. We

told the Settlement Governor about all this, and they're ignoring us. They think that just because I'm an archaeologist, I have my nose so firmly in the past that I have no grasp on the present. They told me in the Governor's office that their ward-off fields should be more than enough to hold off the rats. Not a chance. We're talking about a feeding frenzy here, fury locusts, and I don't think they're going to give a ward-off field a second thought. I'm telling you, Fred, these people are going to be in trouble in a year. The Megalts threw in the towel, and they weren't anywhere near as backward as the Governor thinks they were. *Maybe* this wonder ward-off field of his will keep the rats off, but I don't think so. And I don't want to find out that he was wrong by waking up under a blanket of rats. They didn't eat the Megalts—but they ate their *clothes*. I don't fancy piling into a shuttle with my derriere bared to the gentle breezes—which by that time should be around fifty kilometers per hour, and minus twenty Celsius. So I may even beat this report home. Keep the beer cold and the fireplace warm for me."

Well. If ever there was something that matched what Doctor Kenny had suggested, this was it.

Just to be certain, she checked several other sources—not for the veracity of the report, but to see just how prepared the colony was for the "rats" as well as the worsening weather.

Everything she found bore out what the unknown writer had told "Fred." Ward-off generators were standard issue, not heavy-duty. Warehouses had metal doors—and many had plastic or wooden siding. Homes were made of native stone and well insulated against the cold, but had plastic or wooden doors. Food had been stockpiled, but what would the colonists do when the "rats" ate through the warehouse sides to get at the stockpiled rations? The colony had been depending on food grown on-planet for the past twenty years. There were no provisions for importing food and no synthesizers of any real size. They had protein farms—but what if the "rats" got into them and ate the yeast-stock along with everything else? What would they do when the stockpiled food was gone? Or if they managed to save the food, what would they do when—as Fred had suggested—the "rats" ate through their doors and made a meal off their clothing, their blankets, their furniture. . . .

So much for official records. Was there *anyone* on-planet that could pull these people out of their disaster?

It took a full day of searching business directories before she had her answer. An on-planet manufacturer of specialized protection equipment, including heavy-duty ward-off and protection-field generators, could provide protection once the planetary Governor admitted there was a problem. Governmental resources might not be able to pay for all the protection the colonists needed—but over eighty percent of the inhabitants carried hazard insurance, and the insurance companies should pay for protection for their clients.

That was half of the answer. The other half?

Another firm with multiplanet outlets, and a load of old-fashioned synthesizers in a warehouse within shipping distance. They didn't produce much in the way of

variety, but load them up with raw materials, carbon from coal or oil, minerals, protein from yeast and fiber from other vat-grown products, and you had something basic to eat—or wear—or make into furnishings. . . .

She set her scheme in motion. *Not* through Beta, her Supervisor, but through Lars and his.

Before Alex returned, she had made all the arrangements; and she had included carefully worded letters to the two companies she had chosen—plus all of the publicly available records. She tried to convey a warning without sounding like some kind of crazed hyster.

Of course, the fact that she was investing in their firms should at least convey the idea that she was an hyster with money. . . .

If they had any sense, they would be able to put the story together for themselves from the records, and they would believe her. Hopefully, they would be ready.

She transmitted the last of the messages just as Alex arrived at her airclock.

"Permission to come aboard, ma'am," he called cheerfully as she opened the lock for him. He ran up the stairs two at a time, and when he burst into the main cabin, she told herself that fashions would surely change, soon . . . he was dressed in a chrome yellow tunic with neon red piping, and neon red trousers with chrome yellow piping. Both bright enough to hurt the eyes and dazzle the pickups, and she was grateful she could tune down the intensity of her visual receptors.

"How was your reunion?" she asked, once his clothes weren't blinding her.

"There weren't more than a half-dozen of them," he told her, continuing through the hall and down to his own cabin. He pitched both his bags on his bed, and returned. "We just missed Chria by a hair. But we had a good time."

"I'm surprised you didn't come back with a hangover."

He widened his eyes with surprise. "Not me! I'm the Academy designated driver—or at any rate, I make sure people get on the right shuttles. Never touch the stuff, myself, or almost never. Clogs the synapses."

Tia felt irrationally pleased to hear that.

"So, did you miss me? I missed you. Did you have enough to do?" He flung himself down in his chair and put his feet up on the console. "I hope you didn't spend all your time reading Institute papers."

"Oh," she replied lightly, "I found a few other things to occupy my time. . . ."

The comlink was live, and Alex was on his very best behavior—including a fresh, and only marginally rumpled, uniform. He sat quietly in his chair, the very picture of a sober Academy graduate and responsible CS brawn.

Tia reflected that it was just as well she'd bullied him into that uniform. The transmission was shared by Professor Barton Glasov y Verona-Gras, head of the Institute, and a gray-haired, dark-tuniced man the Professor identified as Central Systems Sector Administrator Joshua Elliot-Rosen y Sinor. Very high in Administration. And just now, very concerned about something, although he hid his concern well. Alex had snapped to a kind of

seated "attention" the moment his face appeared on the screen.

"Alexander, Hypatia—we're going to be sending you a long file of stills and holos," Professor Barton began. "But for now, the object you see here on my desk is representative of our problem."

The "object" in question was a perfectly lovely little vase. The style was distinctive; skewed, but with a very sensuous sinuosity, as if someone had fused Art Nouveau with Salvador Dali. It seemed—as nearly as Tia could tell from the transmission—to be made of multiple layers of opalescent glass or ceramic.

It also had the patina that only something that has been buried for a very long time achieves.

Or something with a chemically faked patina. But would the Professor himself have called them if all he was worried about were fake antiquities? Not likely.

The only problem with the vase—if it was a genuine artifact—was that it did not match the style of any known artifact in any of Tia's files.

"You know that smuggling and site-robbing has always been a big problem for us," Barton continued. "It's very frustrating to come on a site and find it's already been looted. But this—is this doubly frustrating. Because, as I'm sure Hypatia has already realized, the style of this piece does not match that of any known civilization."

"A few weeks ago, hundreds of artifacts in this style flooded the black market," Sinor said smoothly. "Analysis showed them to be quite ancient—this piece, for instance, was made some time when Ramses the Second was Pharaoh."

The professor was not wringing his hands, but his distress was fairly obvious. "There are *hundreds* of these objects!" he blurted. "Everything from cups to votive offerings, from jewelry to statuary! We not only don't know where they've come from, but we don't even know anything about the people that made them!"

"Most of the objects are not as well preserved as this one, of course," Sinor continued, sitting with that incredible stillness that only a professional politician or actor achieves. "But besides being incredibly valuable, and not incidentally funneling money into the criminal subculture, there is something else rather distressing associated with these artifacts."

Tia knew what it *bad* to be as soon as the words were out of the man's mouth. Plague.

"Plague," he said solemnly. "So far this has not been a fatal disease, at least not to the folk who bought these little trinkets. They have private physicians and in-house medicomps, obviously."

High Families, Tia surmised. *So the High Families are mixed up in this.*

"The objects really aren't dangerous, once they've been through proper decontamination procedures," the professor added hastily. "But whoever is digging these things up isn't even bothering with a run under the UV gun. He's just cleaning them up—"

Tia winced inwardly, and *saw* Alex wince. To tell an archeologist that a smuggler had "cleaned up" an artifact was like telling a coin collector that his nephew Joey

had gotten out the wire brush and shined up his collection for him.

"—cleaning them up, putting them in cases, and selling them." Professor Barton sighed. "I have no idea why his helpers aren't coming down with this. Maybe they're immune. Whatever the reason, the receivers of these pieces are, they are not happy about it, and they want something done."

His expression told Tia more than his words did. The High Families had bought artifacts they must have known were smuggled and possibly stolen, and some members of their circle had gotten sick. And because the Institute was the official organization in charge of ancient relics, they expected the Institute to find the smuggler and deal with him.

Not that any of them would tell us how and where they found out about these treasures. Nor would they ever admit that they knew they were gray-market, if not black. And if they'd stop buying smuggled artifacts, they wouldn't get sick.

But none of that meant anything when it came to the High Families, of course. They were too wealthy and too powerful to ever find themselves dealing with such simple concepts as *cause and effect*.

Hmm. Except once in a great while—like now—when it rises up and bites them.

"In spite of the threat of disease associated with these pieces, they are still in very high demand," Sinor said.

Because someone in the High Families spread the word that you'd better run the thing through decontamination after you buy it, so you can have your pretty without penalty. But there was something wrong with this story. Something that didn't quite fit. But she couldn't figure out what it was.

Meanwhile, the transmission continued. "But I don't have to tell either of you how dangerous it is to have these things out there," Professor Barton added. "It's fairly obvious that the smugglers are not taking even the barest of precautions with the artifacts. It becomes increasingly likely with every piece sold at a high price that someone will steal one, or find out where the source is, or take one to a disadvantaged area to sell it."

A slum, you mean, Professor. Was he putting too much emphasis on this?

Tia decided to show that both she and her brawn were paying attention. "I can see what could happen then, gentlemen," she countered. "Disease spreads very quickly in areas of that sort, and what might not be particularly dangerous for someone of means will kill the impoverished."

And then we have a full-scale epidemic and a panic on our hands. But he had to know how she felt about this. He knew who she was—there weren't too many "Hypatias" in the world, and he had been the immediate boss of Pota and Braddon's superior. He had to know the story. He was probably trading on it.

"Precisely, Hypatia," said Sinor, in an eerie "answer" to her own thoughts.

"I hope you aren't planning on using us as smuggler-hunters," Alex replied slowly. "I couldn't pass as High

Family in a million years, so I couldn't be in on the purchasing end. And we aren't allowed to be armed—I know I don't want to take on the smuggling end without a locker full of artillery!"

In other words, gentlemen, "We ain't stupid, we ain't expendable, and we ain't goin'." But this was all sounding a little too pat, a little too contrived. If Sinor told them that they *weren't* expected to catch the smugglers themselves . . .

"No," Sinor said soothingly—and a little too hastily. "No, we have some teams in the Enforcement Division going at both ends. *However*, it is entirely possible that the source for these artifacts is someone—or rather, several someones—working on Exploration or Evaluation teams. Since the artifacts showed up in this sector first, it is logical to assume that they originate here."

Too smooth. Too pat. This is all a story. But why?

"So you want us to keep our eyes peeled when we make our deliveries," Alex filled in.

"You two are uniquely suited," Barton pointed out. "You both have backgrounds in archeology. Hypatia, you know how digs work, intimately. Once you know how to identify these artifacts, if you see even a hint of them—shards, perhaps, or broken bits of jewelry—you'll know what they are and where they came from."

"We can do that," Tia replied carefully. "We can be a little snoopy, I think, without arousing any suspicions."

"Good. That was what we needed." Professor Barton sounded very relieved. "I suppose I don't need to add that there is a bonus in this for you."

"I can live with a bonus," Alex responded cheerfully.

The two VIPs signed off, and Alex turned immediately to Tia.

"Did that sound as phony to you as it did to me?" he demanded.

"Well, the objects they want are certainly real enough," she replied, playing back her internal recording of the conversation and analyzing every word. "But whether they really are artifacts is another question. There's definitely more going on than they're willing to tell us."

Alex leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. "Are these things financing espionage or insurrection?" he hazarded. "Or buying weapons?"

She stopped her recording; there was something about the artifact that bothered her. She enhanced the picture and threw it up on the screen.

"What's wrong with this?" she demanded. Alex leaned forward to have a look.

"Is that a hole bored in the base?" he said. "Bored in, then patched over?"

"Could be." She enhanced her picture again. "Does it seem to you that the base is awfully thick?"

"Could be," he replied. "You know . . . we have only *their* word that these are 'alien artifacts.' What if they are nothing of the sort?"

"They wouldn't be worth much of anything, unless—"

The answer came to her so quickly that it brought its own fireworks display with it. "Got it!" she exclaimed, and quickly accessed the Institute library for a certain old news program.

She remembered this one from her own childhood, both for the fact that it had been an ingenious way to smuggle and because Pota had caught her watching it, realized what the story was about, and shut it off. But not before Tia had gotten the gist of it.

One of the Institute archeologists had been subverted by a major drug-smuggler who wanted a way to get his supply to Central. In another case where there were small digs on the same planets as colonies, the archeologist had himself become addicted to the mood-altering drug called "Paradise," and had made himself open to blackmail.

The blackmail came from the supplier-producer himself. Out there in the fringe, it was easy enough to hide his smuggled supplies in ordinary shipments of agri-goods, but the nearer one got to civilization, the harder it became. Publicly available transport was out of the question.

But there were other shipments going straight to the heart of civilization. Shipments that were so innocent, so fragile, they never saw a customs inspector. Such as . . . Institute artifacts.

So the drug-dealer molded his product in the likeness of pottery shards. And the archeologist on-site made sure they got packed like any other artifacts and shipped—although they were never cataloged. Once the shipment arrived at the Institute, a worker inside the receiving area would set the crates with particular marks aside, and leave them on the loading dock overnight. They would, of course, disappear, but since they had never been cataloged, they were never missed.

The only reason the archeologist in question had been caught was because an overzealous graduate student *had* cataloged the phony shards, and when they came up missing at the Institute, the police became involved.

Tia ran the news clip for Alex, who watched it attentively. "What do you think?" she asked when it was over.

"I think our friend in the dull blue striped tunic had a strangely fit look about him. The look that says 'police' to yours truly." Alex nodded. "I think you're right. I think someone is trying the artifact-switch again, except that this time they're coming in on the black market."

She did a quick access to the nets, and began searching for a politician named Sinor. She found one—but he did *not* match the man she had seen on the transmission.

"The trick is probably that if someone sees a crate full of smuggled glassware, they don't think of drugs." Tia felt very smug over her deduction, and her identification of Sinor as a ringer. Of course, there was no way of knowing if her guess was right or wrong, but still . . . "The worst that is likely to happen to an artifact-smuggler is a fine and a slap on the wrist. They aren't taken very seriously, even though there's serious money in it and the smugglers may have killed to get them."

"That's assuming inspectors even find the artifacts. So where were we supposed to fit into all this?" Alex ran his hand through his hair. "Do they think we're going to find this guy?"

"I think that they think he's working with one of the small-dig people again. By the way, you were right

about Sinor. Or rather, the Sinor we saw is not the one of record." Another thought occurred to her. "You know—their story may very well have been genuine. There's not a lot of room in jewelry to hid drugs. Whoever is doing this may have *started* by smuggling out the artifacts, freelance, then got tangled up with some crime syndicate, and now he's been forced to deal the fake, drug-carrying artifacts along with the real ones."

"Now *that* makes sense!" Alex exclaimed. "That fits all the parameters. Do we still play along?"

"Ye-es," she replied slowly. "But in a severely limited sense, I'd say. We aren't trained in law enforcement, and we don't carry weapons. If we see something, we report it, and get the heck out."

"Sounds good to me, lady," Alex replied, with patent relief. "I'm not a coward—but I'm not stupid. And I didn't sign up with the BB program to get ventilated by some low-down punk. If I wanted to do *that*, all I have to do is stroll into certain neighborhoods and flash some glitter. Tia—why all that nonsense about Plague?"

"Partially to hook us in, I think," she said, after a moment. "They know we were the team that got the Zombie bug—we'll feel strongly about Plague. And partially to keep us from touching these objects. If we don't mess with them, we won't know about the drug link."

He made a sound of disgust. "You'd think they'd have trusted us with the real story. I'm half tempted to blow this whole thing off, just because they didn't. I won't—but I'm tempted," he added hastily.

He began warming up the boards, preparatory to taking off. Tia opened a channel to traffic control—but while she did so, she was silently wondering if there was even more to the story than *she* had guessed.

There was something bothering Alex, and as they continued on their rounds, he tried to put his finger on it. It was only after he replayed the recorded transmission of Professor Barton and the bogus "Sinor" that he realized what it was.

Tia had known that Professor Barton was genuine—without checking. And Barton had said things that indicated he knew who she was.

He had never really wondered about her background. He'd always assumed that she was just like every other shellperson he'd ever known; popped into her shell at birth, because of fatal birth-defects, with parents who rather would forget she had ever been born. Who were just as pleased that she was someone else's problem.

What was it that the Professor had said, though? *You both have backgrounds in archeology. Hypatia, you know how digs work, intimately.*

From everything that Jon Chernov had said, the shellperson program was so learning-intensive that there *was* no time for hobbies. A shellperson only acquired hobbies after he got out in the real world and had leisure time for them. The Lab Schools' program was so intensive that even play was scheduled and games were choreographed, planned, and taught just like classes. There was no room to foster an "interest" in archeology. And it was not on the normal course curriculum.

The only way you knew how digs worked "intimate-ly" was to work on them yourself. . . . Or be the child of archeologists who kept you on-site with them.

That was when it hit him; something Tia had said. *The Cades met while they were recovering from Henderson's Chorea.* That kind of information would not be the sort of thing someone who made a hobby of archeology would know. Details of archeologists' lives were of interest only to people who knew them.

Under cover of running a search on EsKay digs, he pulled up the information on the personnel—backtracking to the last EsKay dig the Cades had been on.

And there it was, C-121. Active personnel, Braddon Maartens-Cade, Pota Andropolous-Cade. Dependent, *Hypatia* Cade, age seven.

Hypatia Cade; evacuated to station hospital *Pride of Albion* by MedService AI-drone. Victim of some unknown disease. Braddon and Pota put in isolation—*Hypatia* never heard from again. Perhaps she died—but that wasn't likely.

There could not be very many girls named "Hypatia" in the galaxy. The odds of two of them being evacuated to the same hospital ship were tiny; the odds that *his* Tia's best friend, Doctor Kennet Uhua-Sorg, who was chief of Neurology and Neurosurgery—would have been the same doctor in charge of that other Tia's case were so minuscule he wasn't prepared to try to calculate them.

He replaced the file and logged off, feeling as if he had just been hit in the back of the head with a board.

Oh, spirits of space. When she took me as brawn, I made a toast to our partnership—"may it be as long and fruitful as the Cades". "Oh, decom it. I'm surprised she didn't bounce me out the airlock right then and there.

"Tia," he said carefully into the silent cabin. "I—uh—I'd like to apologize—"

"So, you found me out, did you?" To his surprise and profound relief, she sounded *amused*. "Yes, I'm Hypatia Cade. I thought about telling you, but then I was afraid you'd feel really badly about verbally falling over your own feet. You do realize that you can't access any data without my being aware of it, don't you?"

"Well, heck, and I thought I was being so sneaky."

He managed a weak grin. "I thought I'd really been covering my tracks well enough that you wouldn't notice. I—uh—really am sorry if I made you feel badly."

"Oh, Alex, it would only have been tacky and tasteless—or stupid and insensitive—if you'd done it on purpose." She laughed; he'd come to like her laugh, it was a deep, rich one. He'd often told her BB jokes just so he could hear it. "So it's neither; it's just one of those things. I assume that you're curious now; what is it you want to know about me?"

"Everything" he blurted, and then flushed with embarrassment. "Unless you'd rather not talk about it."

"Alex, I don't mind at all! I had a very *happy* childhood, and frankly, it will be a lot more comfortable being able to talk about Mum and Dad—or *with* Mum and Dad—without trying to hide them from you." She giggled this time, instead of laughing. "Sometimes I felt as if I was trying to hide a secret lover, only in reverse!"

"So you still stay in contact with your parents?" Alex was fascinated; this went against *everything* he'd been told about shellpersons, either at the Academy or directly from Jon Chernov. Shellpersons didn't have families; their Supervisors and classmates were their families.

"Of course I still stay in contact with them. I'm their biggest fan. If archeologists can have fans." Her center screen came up; on it was a shot of Pota and Braddon, proudly displaying an ornate set of body armor. "Here's something from their latest letter; they just uncovered the armory, and what they found is going to set the scholastic world on its collective ears. That's iron plates you see on Bronze Age armor."

"No—" he stared in fascination, and not just at the armor. At Pota and Braddon, smiling and waving like any other parents for their child. Pota pointed to something on the armor, while Braddon's mouth moved, explaining something. Tia had the sound off, and the definition wasn't good enough for Alex to lip-read.

"That's not *my* real interest, though," she continued. "I was telling you the truth. I'm after the EsKay home-world, but I want it because I want to *find* the bug that got me." The two side-screens came up, both with older pictures. "Before you ask, dear, there I am. The one on the right is my seventh birthday party, the one on the left, as you can see, is a picture of me with Theodore Bear and Moira's brawn Tomas—Ted was a present from both of them." She paused for a moment. "Just checking. Yes, that's the last good picture that was taken of me. The rest are all in the hospital, and I wouldn't inflict them on anyone but a neurologist."

Alex studied the two pictures, each of which showed the same bright-eyed, elfin child. An incredibly *pretty* child, dark-haired, blue-eyed, with a thin, delicate face and a smile that wouldn't stop. "How did you get into the shellperson program?" he asked. "I thought they didn't take anyone after the age of one."

"They didn't, until me. That was Doctor Kenny's doing, and Lars, the systems manager for the hospital; they were convinced that I was flexible enough to make the transition—since I was intelligent enough to *understand* what had happened to me, and what it meant. Which was," she added, "complete life support. No mobility."

He shuddered. "I can see why you wouldn't want that to happen to anyone else ever again."

"Precisely." She blanked the screens before he had a chance to study the pictures further. "After I turned out so well, Lab Schools started considering older children on a case-by-case basis. They've taken three, so far, but none as old as me."

"Well, my lady—as remarkable as you are now, you must have been just as remarkable a child," he told her, meaning every word.

"Flatterer," she said, but she sounded pleased.

"I mean it," he insisted. "I interviewed with two other ships, you know. None of them had your personality. I was looking for someone like Jon Chernov; *they* were more like AI drones."

"You've mentioned Jon before," she replied, puzzled. "Just what does *he* have to do with us?"

"Didn't I tell you?" he blurted—then hit himself in the forehead with his hand. "Decom it, I didn't! Jon's a shell-person too; he was the supervisor and systems manager on the research station where my parents worked."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "So *that's* why . . ."

"Why what?"

"Why you treat me like you do—facing my column, asking permission to come aboard, asking me what kind of music I want in the main cabin—"

"Oh, you bet!" he said with a grin. "Jon made darn sure I had good shell-sof manners before he let me go off to the Academy. He'd have verbally blistered my hide if I ever forgot you're here—and that you're the part of the team that can't go off to her own cabin to be alone."

"Tell me about him," she urged.

He had to think hard to remember the first time he ever started talking to Jon. "I think I first realized that he was around when I was about three, maybe two. My folks are chemtechs at one of the Lily-Baer research stations—there weren't a lot of kids around at the time, because it was a new station and most of the personnel were unattached. There weren't a lot of facilities for kids, and I guess what must have happened was that Jon volunteered to babysit while my parents were at work. Wasn't that hard—basically all he had to do was make sure that the door to my room stayed locked except when he sent in servos to feed me and so forth. But I guess I kind of fascinated him, and he started talking to me, telling me stories—then directing the servos in playing with me." He laughed. "For a while my folks thought I was going through the 'invisible friend' stage. Then they got worried, because I didn't grow out of it, and were going to send me to a headshrinker. That was when Jon interrupted while they were trying to make the appointment, and told them that *he* was the invisible friend."

Tia laughed. "You already knew that Moira and I have known each other for a long time—well, she was the CS ship that always serviced my folks' digs; that was how I got to know her."

"Gets you used to having a friend that you can't see, but can talk to," he agreed. "Well, once I started preschool, Jon lost interest for a while, until I started learning to play chess. He is *quite* a player himself; when he saw that I was beating the computer regularly, he remembered who I was and stepped in, right in the middle of a game. I was winning until he took over," he recalled, still a little aggrieved.

"What can I say?" she asked rhetorically.

"I suppose I shouldn't complain. He became my best friend. He was the one that encouraged my interest in archeology—and when it became obvious my parents wouldn't be able to afford all the University courses that would take, he helped get me into the Academy. Did you know that a recommendation from a shellperson counts twice as much as a recommendation from anyone but a PTA and up?"

"No, I didn't!" She sounded surprised and amused. "Evidently they trust our judgment."

"Well, you've heard his messages. He's probably as pleased with how things turned out as I am." He spread

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his hands wide. "And that's all there is to know about me."

"Hardly," she retorted dryly. "But it does clear up a few mysteries."

When Alex hit his bunk that night, he found he was having a hard time getting to sleep. He'd always thought of Tia as a person—but now he had a face to put with the name.

Jon Chernov had shown him, once, what Jon would have looked like if he could have survived outside the shell. Alex had known that it was going to be hideous, and had managed not to shudder or turn away, but it had taken a major effort of will. After that it had just been easier not to put a face with the voice. There were completely nonhuman races that looked more human than poor Jon.

But Tia had been a captivatingly pretty child. She would have grown up into a stunning adult. *Shoot, inside that shell, she probably is a stunning adult. A stunning, lifeless adult. Like a puppet with no strings; a sex-companion android with no hookups.* He had no desire to crack her column; he was not the sort to be attracted by anything lifeless. *Feeble-porn* had given him the creeps, and his one adolescent try with a sex-droid had sent him away feeling dirty and used.

But it made the tragedy of what had happened to her all the more poignant. Jon's defects were such that it was a relief for everyone that he was in the shell. Tia, though . . .

But she was happy. She was as happy as any of his classmates in the Academy. So where was the tragedy? Only in his mind.

Only in his mind. . . .

Alex would have been perfectly happy if the past twelve hours had never happened.

He and Tia returned to Diogenes Base after an uneventful trip expecting to be sent out on another series of message-runs, only to learn that on *this* run, they would be carrying passengers. Those passengers were on the way from Central and the Institute by way of commercial liner and would not arrive for another couple of days.

That had given him a window of opportunity for a little shore leave, in a base town that catered to some fairly heavy spacegoing traffic, and he had taken it.

Now he was sorry he had . . . oh, not for any serious reasons. He hadn't gotten drunk, or mugged, or into trouble. No, he'd only made a fool out of himself.

Only.

He'd gone out looking for company in the spaceport section, hanging around in the pubs and food-bars. He'd gotten more than one invitation, too, but the one he had followed up on was from a dark-haired, blue-eyed, elfin little creature with an infectious laugh and a nonstop smile. "Bet" was her name, and she was a fourth-generation spacer, following in her family's footloose tradition.

He hadn't wondered what had prompted his choice —hadn't even wondered why he had so deviated from his normal "type" of brown-haired, brown-eyed and ath-

letic. He and the girl—who, it turned out, was the crew chief of an AI-freighter—had a good time together. They hit a show, had some dinner . . . and by mutual agreement, wound up in the same hotel room.

He still hadn't thought about his choice of company; then came the moment of revelation.

When, in the midst of intimacy, he called her "Tia."

He could have died, right then and there. Fortunately the young lady was understanding; Bet just giggled, called him "Giorgi" back, and they went on from there. And when they parted, she kissed him, and told him that his "Tia" was a lucky wench, and to give her Bet's regards.

Thank the spirits of space he didn't have to tell her the truth. All she'd seen was the CS uniform and the spacer-habits and speech-patterns; he could have been anything. She certainly wasn't thinking "brawn" when she had picked him up, and he hadn't told her what he did for the Courier Service.

Instead of going straight back to the ship, he dawdled; visited a multivirtual amusement park, and took five of the wildest adventures it offered. It took all five to wash the embarrassment of his slip out of his recent memory, to put it into perspective.

But nothing would erase the meaning of what he had done. And it was just his good fortune—and Tia's—that his partner hadn't known who Tia was. Brawns had undergone Counseling for a lot less. CS had a nasty habit for dealing with slips like that one. They wouldn't risk one of their precious shellpersons in the hands of someone who might become so obsessed with her that he would try to get at the physical body.

He returned to the docks in a decidedly mixed state of mind, and with no ideas at all about what—if anything—he could do about it.

Tia greeted her brawn cheerfully when he came aboard, but she left him alone for a little while he got himself organized—or as organized as Alex ever got. "I've got the passenger roster," she said, once he'd stowed his gear. "Want to see what we're getting for the next couple of weeks?"

"Sure," Alex replied, perking up visibly. He had looked tired when he came in; Tia reckoned shrewdly that he had been celebrating his shore leave a little too heavily. He wasn't suffering from a hangover, but it looked to her as if he'd done his two-day pass to the max, squeezing twenty-two hours of fun into every twenty-four-hour period. He dropped down into his chair and she brought up her screens for him.

"Here's our leader, Doctor Izak Hollister-Aspen." The Evaluation Team leader was an elderly man; a QuadDoc, as thin as a grass stem, clean-shaven, silver-haired, and so frail-looking Tia was half afraid he might break in the first high wind. "He's got four doctorates, he's published twelve books and about two hundred papers, and he's been head of twenty-odd teams already. He also seems to have a pretty good sense of humor. Listen."

She let the file-fragment run. "I must admit," Aspen said, in a cracked and quavery voice, "there are any number of my colleagues who would say that I should

sit behind my desk and let younger bodies take over this dig. Well," he continued, cracking a smile, "I am going to do something like that. I'm going to sit behind my desk in my dome, and let the younger bodies of my team members take over the digging. Seems to me that's close enough to count."

Alex chuckled. "I like him already. I was afraid this trip was going to be a bore."

"Not likely, with him around. Well, this is our second-in-command, DoubleDoc Siegfried Haakon-Fritz. And if this lad had been in charge, I think it might have been a truly dismal trip." She brought up the image of Fritz, who was a square-jawed, steely-eyed, stern-faced monument. He could have been used as the model for any ortho-Communist memorial statue to The Glorious Worker In Service To The State. Or maybe the Self-Righteous In Search Of A Convert. There was nothing like humor anywhere in the man's expression. It looked to her as if his head might crack in half if he ever smiled. "This is all I have, five minutes of silent watching. He didn't say a word. But maybe he doesn't believe in talking when it's being recorded."

"Why not?" Alex asked curiously. "Is he paranoid about being recorded or something?"

"He's a Practical Darwinist," she told him.

"Oh, brother," Alex replied with disgust. The Practical Darwinists had their own sort of notoriety, and Tia was frankly surprised to find one in the Institute at all. They were generally concentrated in the soft sciences—when they were in the sciences at all. Personally, Tia did not consider Political Science to be particularly scientific. . . .

"His political background is kind of dubious," she continued, "but since there's nothing anyone can hang on him, it simply says in the file that his politics have not always been that of the Institute. That's bureaucratic double-talk for someone they would rather not trust, but have no reason to keep out of a position of authority."

"Got you," Alec nodded. "So, we'll just not mention politics around him, and we'll make sure it's one of the forbidden subjects in the main cabin. Who's next?"

"These are our PostDocs; they have their hard-science doctorates, and now they're working on their Archeology doctorates." She split her center screen and installed them both on at once. "On the right, Les Dimand-Taylor, human; on the right, Treel rish-Yr nal-Leert, Rayanthan. Treel is female. Les has a Bio doc, and Treel Xenology."

"Hmm, for Treel wouldn't Xenology be the study of *humans*?" Alex pointed out. Les was a very intense fellow, thin, heavily tanned, very fit-looking, with haunted eyes. Treel's base-type seemed to be cold-weather mammalian, as she had a pelt of very fine, dense brown fur that extended down onto her cheekbones. Her round, black eyes stared directly into the lens, giving the viewer the impression that she was cataloging it all.

"No audio on the PostDocs, just static file pictures," she continued. "They're attached to Aspen."

"Not to Old Stone Face?" Alex asked. "Never mind. Any grad student or PostDoc he'd have would be a clonal copy of himself. I can't imagine any other type staying with him for long."

"And here are our grad students," Again she split the screen. "Still working on the first doctorate. Both male. Aldon Reese-Tambuto, human; and Fred, from Dushayne."

"Fred?" Alex spluttered. Understandably. The Dushaynese could not possibly have looked *less* human; he had a square, flat head—literally. Flat on top, flat face, flattened sides. He was bright green, and had no mouth, just a tiny hole below his nostril slits. Dushaynese were vegetarian to an extreme; on their homeworld they lived on tree sap and fruit juice. Out in the larger galaxy they did very well on sucrose-water and other liquids. They had, as a whole, very good senses of humor.

"Fred?" Alex repeated.

"Fred," she said firmly. "Very few humans would be able to reproduce his real name. His vocal organ is a vibrating membrane in the top of his head. He does human speech just fine, but we can't manage his." She blanked her screens. "I'll spare you their speeches; they are very eager, very typical young grad students and this will be their first dig."

"Save me . . ." Alex moaned.

"Be nice," she said firmly. "Don't disillusion them. Let the next two years take care of that."

He waved his hands vigorously. "Far be it from me to let them know what gruesome fate awaits them. What was the chance of death on a dig? Twenty percent? And there's six of them?"

"The chance of catching something nonfatal is a lot higher," she pointed out. "Actually, the honor of being the fatality usually goes to the PostDocs or the second-in-command; they're the ones doing the major explorations when a dig hits something like a tomb. The grad students usually are put to sifting sand and cataloging pottery shards."

Alex didn't get a chance to respond to that, for the first members of the team arrived at the lock at that moment, and he went down the lift to welcome them aboard, while Tia directed the servos in storing most of their baggage in the one remaining empty hold. As they came up the lift, both the young "men" were chattering away at high speed, with Alex in the middle, nodding sagely from time to time and clearly not catching more than half of what they said. Tia decided to rescue him.

"Welcome aboard, Fred, Aldon," she said, cutting through the chatter with her own, higher-pitched voice.

Silence, as both the grad students looked around for the speaker.

Fred caught on first, and while his face remained completely without expression, he had already learned the knack of displaying human-type emotions with his voice. "My word!" he exclaimed with delight. "You are a brainship, are you not, dear lady?"

As a final incongruity, he had adopted a clipped British accent to go along with his voice.

"Precisely, sir," she replied. "AH One-Oh-Three-Three at your service, so to speak."

"Wow," Aldon responded, clearly awestruck. "We get to ride in a brainship? They've actually put us on a brainship? Wow, PTAs don't even get rides from brainships! I've never even seen a brainship before—uh, hi,

what's your real name?" He turned slowly, trying to figure out which way to face.

"Hypatia; Tia for short," she replied, tickled by the young beings' responses. "Don't worry about where to look, just assume I'm the whole ship. I am, you know. I even have eyes in your quarters"—she chuckled at Aldon's flush of embarrassment—"but don't worry, I won't use them. Your complete privacy is important to us."

"I can show you the cabins, and you can pick the ones you want," Alex offered. "They're all the same; I'm just reserving the one nearest the main cabin for Doctor Hollister-Aspen."

"Stellar!" Aldon enthused. "Wow, this is better than the liner coming in! I had to share a cabin with Fred and two other guys."

"Quite," Fred seconded. "I enjoyed Aldon's company, but the other two were—dare I say—spoiled young reprobates? High Family affectations without the style, the connections, or the Family. Deadly bores, I assure you, and a spot of privacy will be welcome. Shall we, then?"

The two grad students were unpacking their carry-on baggage when the two PostDocs arrived, this time singly. Treel arrived first, accepted the greetings with the calm, intense demeanor of a Zen Master, and took the first cabin she was offered.

Les Dimand-Taylor was another case altogether. It was obvious to Tia the moment he came aboard—*without* the automatic salute he made to her column—that he was ex-military. He confirmed her assumption as soon as Alex offered him a cabin.

"Anything will do, old man," he said, with a kind of nervous cheer. "Better than barracks, that's for sure. Unless . . . lady Tia, you don't have anything that makes an unexpected noise in the middle of the night, do you? I'm afraid"—he laughed a little shakily—"I'm afraid I'm just a little twitchy about noises when I'm asleep. What they euphemistically call 'unfortunate experiences.' I'll keep my door locked so I don't disturb anyone but—"

"Give him the cabin next to Treel, Alex," she said firmly. "Doctor Dimand-Taylor—"

"Les, my dear," he replied, with a thin smile. "Les to you and your colleagues, always. Pulled me out of a tight spot, one of you BB teams did. Besides, when people hear my title they tend to start telling me about their backs and innards. Hate to have to tell them that I'd only care about their backs if the too, too solid flesh had been melted off the bones for the past thousand years or so."

"Les, then," she said. "I assume you know Treel?"

"Very well. A kind and considerate lady. If you have her assigned as my neighbor, she's so quiet I never know she's there." He seemed relieved that Tia didn't press him for details on the "tight spot" he'd been in.

"That cabin and hers are buried in the soundproofing around the holds," Tia told him. "You shouldn't hear anything—and I can generate white noise for you at night, if you'd like."

He relaxed visibly. "That would be charming of you, thanks awfully. My superior Doc Aspen told the others about my little eccentricities, so they know not to startle me, so we should be fine."

He went about his unpacking, and Alex returned to the main cabin.

"Commando," Tia said succinctly.

"That in his records?" Alex asked. "I'm surprised they left that there. Not saying where, though, are they?"

"If you know where to look and what to look at, the fact that he was a Commando *is* in his records," she told her brawn. "But where—that's not in the Institute file. It's probably logged somewhere. Remember not to walk quietly, my dear."

"Since I'd rather not get karate-chopped across the throat, that sounds like a good idea." He thought for a moment, and went off to his cabin, returning with what looked like a bracelet with a bell on it. "These things went into fashion a couple of months ago, and I bought one, but I didn't like it." He bent over to fasten it around his boot. "There. Now he'll hear me coming, in case I forget to stamp." The bell was not a loud one, but it was definitely producing an audible sound.

"Good idea. Ah, here's The Man himself—Alex, he's going to need some help."

Alex hurried down to the lift area and gave Doctor Aspen a hand with his luggage. There wasn't much of it, but Doctor Aspen was not capable of carrying much for long. Tia wondered what could have possessed the Institute to permit this man to go out into the field again.

She found out, once he was aboard. His staff immediately clustered around him, fired with enthusiasm, as soon as he was settled in his cabin. He asked permission of Tia and Alex to move the convocation into the main cabin and use one of her screens.

"Certainly," Tia answered, when Alex deferred to her. She was quite charmed by Doctor Aspen, who called her "my lady," and accorded to her all the attention and politeness he gave his students and underlings.

As they moved into main room, Doctor Aspen turned toward her column. "I am told that you have some interest and education in archeology, my lady Tia," he said as he settled into a seat near one of the side screens. "You, too, Alex. Please, since you'll be on-site with us, feel free to participate. And if you know something we should, or notice something we miss, feel free to contribute."

Alex was obviously surprised; Tia wasn't. She had gleaned some of this from the records. Aspen's students stayed with him, went to enormous lengths to go on-site with him, went on to careers of their own full of warm praise for their mentor. Aspen was evidently that rarest of birds, the exceptional, inspirational teacher who was also a solid researcher and scientist.

Within moments, Aspen had drawn them all into his charmed circle, calling up the first team's records, drawing his students—and even Alex—into making observations. Tia kept a sharp eye out for the missing member of the party, however, for she had the feeling that Haakon-Fritz had deliberately timed his entrance to coincide with the gathering of Aspen's students. Tia figured that he wanted an excuse to feel slighted. She wasn't going to give it to him.

She could, and did, hook herself into the spaceport surveillance system, and she spotted Haakon-Fritz com-

ing long before he was in range of her own sensors. Plenty of time to interrupt the animated discussion with a subtle, "Gentlebeings, Doctor Haakon-Fritz is crossing the tarmac."

Treel and Les exchanged a look, but said nothing. Aspen simply smiled, and rose from his chair, as Tia froze the recording they had been watching. Alex hurried down the stairs to intercept Haakon-Fritz at the lift.

So instead of being greeted by the backs of those deep in discussion, the man found himself greeted by the Courier Service brawn, met at the top of the lift by the rest of his party, and given an especially hearty greeting by his superior.

His expression did not change so much as a hair, but Tia had the distinct feeling that he was disgruntled. "Welcome aboard, Doctor Haakon-Fritz," Tia said, as he shook hands briefly with the other members of his party. "We have a choice of five cabins for you, if you'd care—"

"If you have more than one cabin available," Haakon-Fritz interrupted rudely, speaking not to Tia, who he ignored, but to Alex, "I would like to see them all before I make a choice."

Tia knew Alex well enough by now to know that he was angry, but he covered it beautifully. "Certainly, Professor," he said, giving Haakon-Fritz the lesser of his titles. "If you'll follow me . . ."

He led the way back into the cabin section, leaving Haakon-Fritz to carry his own bags.

Treel made a little growl that sounded like disgust; Fred rolled his eyes, which was the closest he could come to a facial expression. "My word," Fred said, his voice ripe with surprise. *That* was certainly rude!"

"He ees a Practical Darweeneest," Treel replied, with a curl to her lip. "Your pardon, Seer," she said to Aspen. "I know that you feel he ees a good scienteest, but I am glad he ees not the one in scharge."

Fred was still baffled. "Practical Darwinist?" he said. "Does someone want to explain to a baffled young veggie just what that might be and *why* he was so rude to lady Tia?"

Les took up the gauntlet with a sigh. "A Practical Darwinist is one who believes that Darwin's Law applies to *everything*. If someone is in an accident, they shouldn't be helped; if an earthquake levels a city, no aid should be sent; if a Plague breaks out, only the currently healthy should be inoculated; the victims should be isolated and live or die as the case may be."

Fred's uneasy glance toward her column made Tia decide to spare Les the embarrassment of stating the obvious. "And as you have doubtless surmised, the fanatical Practical Darwinists find the existence of shellpersons to be *horribly* offensive. They won't even acknowledge that we exist, given the option."

Professor Aspen shook his head sadly. "A brilliant scientist, but tragically flawed by fanaticism," he said, as he took his seat again. "Which is why he has gotten as far as he will ever go. He had a chance—was given a solo Exploration dig—and refused to consider any evidence that did not support his own peculiar party line. Now he is left to be the chief clerk of digs like ours." He looked

soberly into the faces of his four students. "Let this be a lesson to you, gentlebeings. Never let fanatic devotion blind you to truth."

"Or, in other words," Tia put in blithely, "The problem with a fanatic is that their brains turn to tofu and they accept nothing as truth except what conforms to their ideas. What makes them dangerous is not that *they'll* die to prove their truth, but that *they'll* let *you* die—or take you with them—to prove it."

"Well put, my lady." Doctor Aspen turned his attention back to the screen. "Now, since I know from past experience that Haakon-Fritz will spend the time until take-off sulking in his cabin—shall we continue with our discussion?"

The Exploration Team had left the site in good shape; equipment stowed, domes inflated but sealed, open trenches covered to protect them. The Evaluation Team erected two new living domes and a second laboratory dome in short order, and settled down to their work.

Everything seemed to be under control; now that the team was on-site, even the sulky Haakon-Fritz fell to and took on his share of the duties. There would seem to have been no need for AH One-Oh-Three-Three to remain on-planet when they could have been making the rounds of "their" established digs.

But that was not what regulations called for, and both Tia and Alex knew why, even if the members of the team didn't. Regulations for a CS ship attached to Institute duty hid a carefully concealed second agenda, when the ship placed a new Exploration or Evaluation Team.

Archeological teams were put together with great care, not only because of the limited number of personnel but because of their isolation. They were going to be in danger from any number of things—all of the hazards that Tia had listed to Alex on their first mission. There was no point in exposing them to danger from within.

So the prospective members of a given team were probed, tested, and Psyched to a fare-thee-well, both for individual stability and for interactive stability with the rest of the team. Still, mistakes could be made, and had been, in the past. Sometimes those mistakes had led to a murder, or at least, an attempted murder.

When a psychological problem surfaced, it was usually right at the beginning of the stint, after the initial settling-in period was over, and once a routine had been established and the stresses of the dig started to take their toll. About that time, if something was going to go wrong, it did. The team had several weeks in cramped quarters in transit to establish interpersonal relations; ideal conditions for cabin fever. Ideal conditions for stress to surface, and that stress could lead to severe interpersonal problems.

So regulations were that the Courier, whether BB or fully manned, was to manufacture some excuse to stay for several days, with the ship personnel staying inside and out of sight, but with the site being fully monitored from inside the ship. The things they were to look for were obvious personality conflicts, new behavioral quirks, or old ones going from "quirk" to "psychosis." Making

sure there was nothing that might give rise to a midnight axe murder. It would not have been the first time that someone snapped under stress.

Alex was most worried about Les, muttering things about post-trauma syndrome and the fragility of combat veterans. Tia had her own picks for trouble, *if* trouble came—either Fred or Aldon, for neither one of them had ever been on-site in a small dig before, and until he went to the Institute, Aldon had never even been off-planet. Despite his unpleasantness to *her*, Haakon-Fritz was brilliant and capable, and he had been on several digs before without any trouble surfacing. And now that they were all on-site, while he was distant, he was also completely cooperative, and his behavior in no way differed from his behavior on previous digs. There was no indication that he was likely to take his fanatic beliefs into his professional life. Fred and Aldon had only been part of a crew of hundreds with an Excavation Team—where there were more people to interact with, fewer chances for personality stress, and no real trials to face but the day-to-day boredom of repetitive work.

For the first couple of days, everything seemed to be just fine, not only as far as the personnel were concerned, but as far as the conditions. Both Tia and Alex breathed a sigh of relief.

Too soon by half.

For that night, the winter rains began.

Tia had been sifting through some of the records she'd copied at the base, looking for another potential investment prospect like Largo Draconis. It was very late—the site was quiet and dark, and Alex had called it a night. He was in his cabin, just about at the dreaming stage, and Tia was considering shutting down for her mandatory three hours of DeepSleep—when the storm struck.

"Struck" was the operative word, for a wall of wind and rain hit her skin hard enough to rattle her for a moment, and that was followed by a blast of lightning and thunder that shook Alex out of bed.

"What?" he yelped, coming up out of sleep with a shout. "How? Who?"

He shook his head to clear it, as another peal of thunder made Tia's walls vibrate. "What's going on?" he asked, as Tia sunk landing-spikes from her feet into the ground beneath her, to stabilize her position. "Are we under attack or something?"

"No, it's a storm, Alex," she replied absently, making certain that everything was locked down and all her servos were inside. "One incredible thunderstorm. I've never experienced anything like it!"

She turned on her external cameras and fed them to her screens so he could watch, while she made certain that she was well insulated against lightning strikes, and that all was still well at the site. He wandered out into the main cabin and sat in his chair, awestruck by the display of raw power going on around them.

Multiple lightning-strikes were going on all around them; not only was the area as bright as day, it was often brighter. Thunder boomed continuously, the wind howled, and sheets—no, entire linen closets—of rain

pounded the ground, not only baffling any attempt at a visual scan of the site, but destroying any hope of any other kind of check. With this much lightning in the air, there was no point even in trying a radio call.

"What's happening at the site?" Alex asked anxiously.

"No way of telling," she said reluctantly. "The Exploration Team went through these rains once already, so I guess we can assume that the site isn't going to wash away, or float away. For the rest—the domes are insulated against lightning, but who knows what's likely to happen to the equipment? Especially in all this lightning?"

Her words proved only too prophetic; for although the rain lasted less than an hour, the deluge marked a forty-degree drop in temperature, and the effects of the lightning were permanent.

When the storm cleared, the news from the site was bad. Lightning had not only struck the ward-off field generator, it had slagged it. There was nothing left but a half-melted pile of plasteel and duraloy. Tia didn't see how one strike could have done that much damage; the generator must have been hit over and over. The back-up was corroded beyond any repair, though Haakon-Fritz and Les labored over it for most of the night. Too many parts had been ruined—probably while it sat in its crate through-who-knew-how-many transfers. Never once uncrated and checked—and now Doctor Aspen's team paid the price for that neglect.

Tia consulted with Doctor Aspen the next morning. There was little sign of the damage from where they sat, but the results were undeniable. No ward-off generator. No protection from native fauna, from insectoids to the big canids. And if the huge grazers, the size of moose, became aggressive, there'd be no way to keep them out of the camp. Ordinary fences would not hold out a herd of determined grazers; the last team had proved that.

"I don't have a spare in the holds," Tia told the team leader. "I don't have even half the parts you need for the corroded generator. There were no storms like the one last night mentioned in the records of the previous team, but we should assume there are going to be more. How many of them can you handle? Winter is coming on, and I can't predict what the native animals are going to do. Do you want to pull the team out?"

Doctor Aspen pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I can't think of any reason why we should, my lady," he replied. "The only exterior equipment that had no protection was the ward-off generator. The first team stayed here without incident all winter—there's nothing large enough to be a real threat to us, so far as I can tell. We'll have a few insects, perhaps, until first hard frost—I imagine those jackal-like beasts will lurk about and make a nuisance of themselves. But they're hardly a threat."

Alex, feet up on the console as usual, agreed with the archeologist. "I don't see any big threat here, either. Unless lightning takes out something a lot more vital."

Tia didn't like it, but she didn't challenge them, either. "If that's the way you want it," she agreed. "But we'll stay until the rains are over, just in case."

Stay they did; but that was the first and the last of the major storms. After the single, spectacular downpour, the

rains came gently, between midnight and dawn, with hardly a peal of thunder to wake Alex. She concluded that the first storm had been a freak occurrence, something no one could have predicted, and lost a little of her ire over the lack of warning from the previous team.

But that still didn't excuse the corroded generator.

Still, the weather stayed cold, and the rain left a coating of ice on everything. It would be gone by midmorning, but the difficulty in walking around the site meant that the team changed their working hours—beginning around 1000 and finishing about 2200. Despite his recorded disclaimer, Doctor Aspen insisted on working alongside his students, and no one, not even Haakon-Fritz, wanted him to risk a fall on the ice.

Meanwhile, Tia made note of a disturbing development. The sudden cold had sent most of the small game and pest animals into hiding or hibernation. That left the normally solitary jackal-dogs without their usual prey, and in what appeared to be seasonal behavior, they began to pack up for the winter, so that they could take down the larger grazers.

The disturbing part was that a very large pack began lurking around the camp.

Now Tia regretted her choice of landing areas. The site was between her and the camp; that was all very well, especially for observing the team at work, but the dogs were lurking in the hills around the camp. And with no ward-off generator to keep them out of it . . .

She mentioned her worry to Alex, who pointed out that the beasts always scattered at any sign of aggression by a human. She mentioned it again to Doctor Aspen, who said the animals were probably just looking for something to scavenge, and would leave the camp alone once they realized there was nothing to eat there.

She never had a chance to mention it again.

With two moons, both in different phases, the nights were never dark unless it was raining. But the flood-lights at the site made certain that the darkness was driven away. And lately, the nights were never silent either; the pack of jackal-dogs wailed from the moment the sun went down to the moment the rains began. Tia quickly became an expert on what those howls meant; the yipping social howl, the long, drawn-out rally cry, and most ominous, the deep-chested hunting call. She was able to tell, just by the sounds, where they were, whether they were in pursuit, and when the quarry had won the chase, or lost it.

Tia wasn't too happy about them; the pack numbered about sixty now, and they weren't looking too prosperous. Evidently the activity at the site had driven away the larger grazers they normally preyed on; that had the effect of making all the smaller packs join up into one mega-pack—so there was always some food, but none of them got very much of it. They weren't at the bony stage yet, but there was a certain desperate gauntness about them. The grazers they did chase were escaping five times out of six—and they weren't getting in more than two hunts in a night.

Should I suggest that the team feed them? Perhaps take a grav-sled and go shoot something and drag it in once

every couple of days? But would that cause problems later? That would give the pack the habit of dependence on humans, and that wouldn't be good. Could they lure the pack into another territory that way, though? Or, would feeding them make them lose their fear of humans? She couldn't quite make up her mind about that, but the few glimpses she'd had of the pack before sunset had put her in mind of certain Russian folk-tales . . . troikas in the snow, horses foaming with panic, and wolves snapping at the runners. Meanwhile, the pack got a little closer each night before they faded into the darkness.

At least it was just about time for the team to break off for the night. Once they were in their domes, they'd be safe.

As if in answer to her thought, the huge lights pivoted up and away from the site, as they were programmed to do, lighting a clear path for the team from the site to the camp. When everyone was safely in the domes, Les would turn them off remotely. So far, the lights alone had kept the jackal-dogs at bay. They lurked just outside the path carved by the lights, but would not venture inside.

As if to answer *that* thought, the pack howled just as the first of the team members emerged from the covered excavation area. It sounded awfully close . . .

Tia ran a quick infrared scan.

The pack was awfully close—right on the top of the hill to the right of the site!

The beasts stared down at the team—and the leader howled again. There was no mistaking that howl, not when all the rest answered it. It was the hunt-call. Quarry sighted; time to begin the chase.

And the leader was staring right at the archeologists. The team stared back, sensing that there was something different tonight. No one stirred; not archeologists, nor jackal-dogs. The beasts' eyes glared red in the darkness, reflection from the work-lights, but not the less disturbing for knowing the scientific explanation.

"Alex," she said tightly. "Front and center. We have a Situation."

He emerged from his cabin as if shot from a gun, took one look at the screen, and pelted for the hold where they kept the HA grav-sled.

Then the pack poured down the hillside in a fury avalanche.

Haakon-Fritz took off like a world-class sprinter, leaving the rest behind. For all the attention he paid them, the rest of his team might just as well have not existed.

Shellcrack! Aspen can't run—

But Les and Treel were not about to leave Aspen to become the Ala Carte Special; as if they had rehearsed the move, they each grabbed one arm, picked him up off his feet between them, and started running. Fred and Aldon grabbed shovels to act as a flank-guard. With the jackal-dogs closing on them with every passing moment, the entire group pelted off for the shelters.

They were barely a quarter of the way there, with the jackals halfway down the hill and gaining momentum when Haakon-Fritz reached the nearest shelter. He hit the side of the dome with a crash, and pawed the door open. He flung himself inside—

And slammed it shut; the red light coming on over the frame indicating that he had locked it.

"Alex!" Tia cried in anguish, as the jackal-dogs bore down upon their prey. "Alex, do something!" She had never felt so horribly helpless.

Grav-sleds made no noise—but they had hedra-players and powerful speakers, meant both to entertain their drivers, and to broadcast prerecorded messages on the fly. A blast of raucous hard-wire shatter-rock blared out from beneath her—she got her underbelly cameras on just as Alex peeled out in the sled at top speed, music screaming at top volume.

The unfamiliar shrieks and howls behind them startled the pack for a moment, and they hesitated, then came to a dead halt, peering over their shoulders. The rock music was so unlike anything they had ever heard before that they didn't know how to react; Alex plowed straight through the middle of them and they shied away to either side.

He was never going to be able to make a pickup on the five still running for their lives without the pack being on all of them—but while he was on the move with music caterwauling, the jackal-dogs hesitated to attack him. And while he was harassing them, their attention was on him, not on their quarry.

That must have been what he had figured in the first place—that he would startle them enough to give the rest of the team a chance to get to safety inside that second dome. While the archeologists ignored what was going on behind them and kept right on to the second shelter, Alex kept making dives at the pack—scattering them, keeping the sled between them and the team. It was tricky flying—stunt-flying with a grav-sled, pulling crazy maneuvers less than a meter from the ground.

He cornered wildly; rocking the sled up on one side, skewing it over in flat spins, feinting at the pack leader and gunning away before the beast could jump into the sled. Over the sound of the wild music, the warning signals and overrides screamed objection to what Alex was doing. Tia longed for her ethological-pack, which was still not approved for Institute ships. With a stun-needle, they could have at least knocked some of the pack out.

The animals assumed that the attack was meant to drive them off or kill them. They must have been hungrier than any of them had guessed, for when nothing happened to hurt or kill any of the pack, they began making attempts to mob the sled.

Tia knew why, then, in a flash of insight. Alex had just gone from "fellow predator" to "prey"; the jackal-dogs were used to grazer-bulls charging them aggressively to try to drive them away. Alex was imitating the behavior of the bulls, though he did not know it—and in better times, the pack probably *would* have responded by moving to easier prey. But these were lean times, and any imitation of prey behavior meant they would try to catch and kill what was taunting them.

Alex was now in real danger.

But Alex was a better flyer than Tia had ever thought; he kept the sled just out of reach of a strong jump; kept it moving in unpredictable turns and spins.

Then, one of the biggest beasts in the pack leapt—and landed, feet scrabbling on the back bumper of the sled.

"Alex!" Tia shrieked again. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw his danger.

He sent the sled into a spin; the sled's protection overrides objected strenuously, whining as they fought him. The jackal-dog fought too, hind claws skidding against the duralloy of the bumper. Alex watched desperately over his shoulder as the beast's claws found a hold, and it began hauling itself over the bumper toward him.

In what was either a burst of inspiration or insanity, he jammed on the braking motors. The sled stopped dead in mid-spin, flinging him sideways against his safety belts—

And flinging the jackal-dog off the back of the sled entirely, sending it flying into the pack, and tumbling at least a dozen of them nose-over-tail.

At that moment the team reached the second dome.

The flash of light as they opened the door told Alex they were safe, and he no longer had to make a target of himself. Alex burned air back toward Tia; she dropped open a cargo bay, activated restraint-fields and hoped he'd be able to brake in time to keep from hitting the back wall. At the speed he was coming, the restraint-fields, meant to keep the sled from banging around too much in rough flight, wouldn't do much.

He didn't even slow down as he reached the bay door, which she slammed down behind him. Instead, he killed the power, and skidded to a halt on the sled's belly in a shower of sparks. The sled skewed sideways and crashed into the back wall—but between Alex's maneuver and the restraint-fields, the impact wasn't bad enough to do more than dent her hold-wall. Once again, Alex was hurled sideways against his seat belts. There were a half-dozen impacts on the cargo door, indicating the leaders of the pack hitting it, unable to stop.

He sat there for a moment, then sagged over the steering wheel, breathing heavily. Nothing on Tia's pickups made her think he was hurt, so she waited for him to catch his breath.

When his breathing slowed, and he looked up, she focused on his face. He was flushed, but showed no shock, and no sign of pain.

"Well," she said, keeping her voice calm and light, "you certainly know how to make an entrance."

He blinked—then leaned back in his seat, and began laughing.

It was no laughing matter the next day when Haakon-Fritz emerged from his shelter and was confronted by the remainder of his team. He had no choice; Tia had threatened to hole his dome if he didn't, giving the beasts a way inside. It was an empty threat, but he didn't know that; like any other fanatical Practical Darwinist, he had never bothered to learn the capabilities of brainships.

Les took charge of him before he had a chance to say anything, using some kind of Commando tactics to get a

hold on the man that immobilized him, then frog-marching him into the ship.

By common consent, everyone else waited until Les and Tia had secured Haakon-Fritz in one of her cabins, with access to what was going on in the main cabin, but no way of interrupting the proceedings. Any time he started in on one of his speeches, she could cut him off, and he'd be preaching to the bare walls.

As the others gathered in the cabin, Doctor Aspen looking particularly shaken and worn, Tia prepared to give them the news. It wasn't completely bad . . . but they weren't going to like part of it.

"We aren't pulling you out," she said, "although we've got that authority. We understand your concern about leaving this dig and losing essentially two years, and we share it."

As she watched four of the five faces register their mix of relief and anticipation, she wished she could give them unmixed orders.

"That's the good news," Alex said, before anyone could respond. "Here's the bad news. In order to stay here, we're going to order you to stay in your domes until the next Courier shows up with your new generator and parts for the old one. We ordered one for you when the old one slugged; the Courier should arrive in about a month or two with the new one."

"But—" Doctor Aspen started to object.

"Doctor, it's that, or we pull you right this moment," Tia said firmly. "We *will not* leave you with those canids on the prowl unless you, each of you, pledge us that. You didn't see how those beasts attacked Alex in his sled. They have no fear of humans now, and they're hungry. They'll attack you without hesitation, and I wouldn't bet on them waiting until dark to do it."

"What's better?" Alex asked shrewdly. "Lose two months of work, or two years?"

With a sigh, Doctor Aspen gave his word, as did the rest—although Fred and Aldon did so with visible relief.

"If they'd just supply us with damned guns . . ." Les muttered under his breath.

"There are sophomores on the other continent. I didn't make the rules, Les," Tia replied, and he flushed. "I didn't make them, but I *will* enforce them. And by the letter of those rules, I should be ordering you to pack right now."

"Speaking of packing . . ." Alex picked up the cue. "We need you to bundle Haakon-Fritz's things and stow them in the hold. He's coming back with us."

Now Les made no attempt to hide his pleasure, but Doctor Aspen looked troubled. "I don't see any reason—" he began.

"Sorry, Doctor, but we do," Alex interrupted. "Haakon-Fritz finally broke the rules. It's pretty obvious to both of us that he attempted to turn his politics into reality."

In his cabin, the subject of discussion got over his shock, and began a shouted tirade. As she had threatened, Tia cut him off—but she kept the recorders going. At the moment, they couldn't *prove* what had been on the man's mind when he locked his colleagues out. With any luck, his own words might condemn him.

"Doctor, no matter what his motivations were, he abandoned us," Les said firmly. "One more fighter might have made a difference to the pack—and the fact remains that when he reached shelter, instead of doing anything helpful, he ran inside and *locked the door*. The former might only have been cowardice—but the latter is criminal."

"That's probably the way the Board of Inquiry will see it," Tia agreed. "We'll see to it that he has justice, but he can't be permitted to endanger anyone else's life this way again."

After a bit more argument, Doctor Aspen agreed. The team left the shelter of the ship, gathered what they could from the dig, and returned to the domes. Well before sunset, Les and Fred returned with a grav-sled laden with Haakon-Fritz's belongings stowed in crates—and by the rattling they were making, the goods hadn't been stowed any too carefully.

Tia didn't intend to expend too much effort in stowing the crates either.

"You'll keep everyone in the domes for us, won't you?" Tia asked Les anxiously. "You're the one I'm really counting on. I don't trust Doctor Aspen's common sense to hold his curiosity at bay for too long."

"You read him right there, dear lady," Les replied, tossing the last of the crates off the sled for the servo to pick up. "But the rest of us have already agreed. Treel was the most likely holdout, but even she agrees with you on your reading of the way those jackal-dogs were acting."

"What will happen to the unfortunate Haakon-Fritz?" Fred asked curiously.

"That's going to depend on the Board," she told him. "I've got a recording of him ranting in his cabin about survival and obsolescence, and pretty much spouting the extremist version of the Practical Darwinism party line. That isn't going to help him any, but how much of it is admissible, I don't know."

"Probably none of it to a court," Les admitted after thought. "But the Board won't like it."

"All of it's been sent on ahead," she told him. "He'll probably be met by police, even if, ultimately, there's nothing he can be charged with."

"At the very least, after this little debacle, he'll be dropped from the list of possible workers for anything less than a Class Three dig," Fred observed cheerfully. "They'll take away his seniority if they have any sense, and demote him back to General Worker. He'll spend the rest of his life with us undergrads, sorting pot-shards."

"Assuming he can *find* anyone who is willing to take a chance on him," Alex responded. "Which I would make no bets on."

He patted Tia's side. "Just be grateful you're not having to go back with us," he concluded. "If you thought the trip out was bad with Haakon-Fritz sulking, imagine what it's going to be like returning."

To be concluded

AMAZING® STORIES

Back Issues and Anthologies

If you like what you've seen in this issue of AMAZING® Stories, there's more where it came from. We have a small selection of back issues dating from the 1960s and 1970s, plus every magazine from May 1990 through July 1992, available for purchase by mail order. The list on this page and the facing page mentions every magazine that's for sale, and gives a few of the stories you'll find in each one.

The list also includes six paperback anthologies that were produced by TSR, Inc., in 1985 through 1987, reprinting many classic stories from older issues—a great way to pick up a representative collection of what was being printed in the good old days.

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April 1968 3 copies
(Cover says June) *Send Her Victorious* by Brian Aldiss; *The Mechanical Heart* by H. I. Barrett; *Stenographer's Hands* by David H. Keller

July 1968 2 copies
House A-Fire by Samuel R. Delany; *Locked Worlds* by Edmond Hamilton; *This Is My Son* by Paul W. Fairman; *The Impossible Weapon* by Milton Lesser

September 1972 23 copies
Fat City by Ross Rocklynne; *Deflation 2001* by Bob Shaw; *Proof* by F. M. Busby; *Jupiter Project* (first of two parts) by Gregory Benford

January 1973 38 copies
The Ascending Aye by Gordon Eklund; *Night Shift* by George R. R. Martin; *On Ice* by Barry N. Malzberg; *Close Your Eyes and Stare at Your Memories* by A. G. Moran

August 1973 50 copies
To Walk With Thunder by Dean McLaughlin; *The Once and Always War* by Gerard F. Conway; *Up Against the Wall* by Robert Thurston; *They Roar* by Clark Cox

— \$1.50 each —

November 1978 19 copies

While the North Wind Blows by Christopher Anvil; *Green Thumb* by Marion Zimmer Bradley; *Last Rocket from Newark* by Jack C. Haldeman II

— \$1.75 each —

May 1990

Giant, Giant Steps by Robert Frazier; *Computer Portrait* by Jayge Carr; *Fatal Disk Error* by George Alec Effinger

July 1990

Harvest by Kristine Kathryn Rusch; *The Secret of Life* by David Brin; *Sequoia Dreams* by Sheila Finch

September 1990

Harlem Nova by Paul Di Filippo; *At Vega's Taqueria* by Richard A. Lupoff; *Wbos List to Hunt* by Susan Shwartz

November 1990

When the Ship Comes In by R. Garcia y Robertson; *Command Performance* by Kathie Koja; *Behind the Eyes of Dreamers* by Pamela Sargent

January 1991

Stranger Suns (Part One) by George Zebrowski; *A Painting Lesson* by Nina Kiriki Hoffman; *Life in a Drop of Pond Water* by Bruce Bethke

March 1991

Dog's Life by Martha Soukup; *The Dragon of Aller* by John Brunner; *Stranger Suns* (Conclusion) by George Zebrowski

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May 1991

A Tip on a Turtle by Robert Silverberg; *Change of Face* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Kevin J. Anderson; *The Ghost Taker* by Lawrence Watt-Evans; *Klepsit* by John Brunner

June 1991

Victoria by Paul Di Filippo; *Hitmen—See Murderers* by Timothy Zahn; *The Sixty-Five Million Year Sleep* by Sharon N. Farber; *the button, and what you know* by W. Gregory Stewart

July 1991

Except My Life, Except My Life, Except My Life by John Morressy; *Arms and the Woman* by James Morrow; *The Perfect Hero* by Elizabeth Moon; *Holos at an Exhibition* by Bruce Boston and Robert Frazier

August 1991

Fantasies by Michael Swanwick and Tim Sullivan; *The Number of the Sand* by George Zebrowski; *The Face of the Waters* by Robert Silverberg

September 1991

Death Link by Gene DeWeese and L. A. Taylor; *The Storming Bone* by Ian McDowell; *Thomas and the Wise Men* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

October 1991

Skin Deep by Brian Stableford; *The Drifter* by Lawrence Watt-Evans; *Wacky Jack 5.1* by W. R. Thompson; *Line Item on a Dead Grant* by Jack C. Haldeman II

November 1991 —Limited supply—

The Implanted Man by F. M. Busby; *The Year of the Guns—Part Two* by Rick Shelley; *The Character Assassin* by Paul Cook

December 1991

Word Salad by Phillip C. Jennings; *Touches* by Gregory Benford; *The Long Fall* by Ben Bova; *The Devil His Due* by Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff; *Pety Any Price, Bear Any Burden* by Ted Reynolds and William F. Wu

January 1992

The Round-Eyed Barbarians by L. Sprague de Camp; *Natural Selection* by Lawrence Watt-Evans; *The Sleeping Serpent* by Pamela Sargent

February 1992

Complications by Brian Stableford; *In Brass Valley* by Avram Davidson; *If There Be Cause* by Sheila Finch; *The Final Page* by Phillip C. Jennings

March 1992

Let Time Shape by George Zebrowski; *The Call* by John Morressy; *Hiatus* by Alexis Glynn Latner; *Reawakening* by Mark J. McGarry

April 1992

Missing Person by William F. Wu; *Life in the Air* by Barry N. Malzberg and Jack Dann; *Isabella of Castile Answers Her Mail* by James Morrow

May 1992

Blades of the Diram Ring by Barry B. Longyear; *Going to Texas (Extra-dition Version)* by Joe Clifford Faust; *Messages Left on a Two-Way Mirror* by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

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The Last Reunion by Harry Turtledove; *Little Brother's Turn to Watch* by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.; *The Red World and the Blue* by Ben Bova

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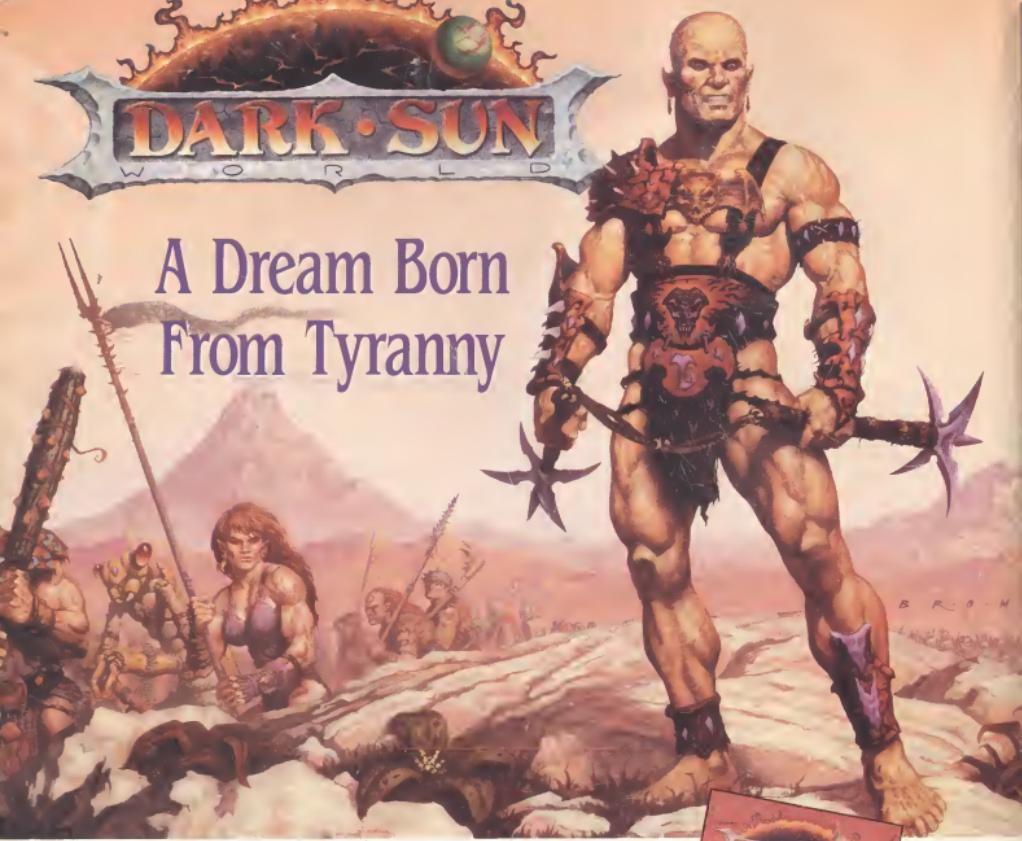


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